

Article 6

Graduate Counseling Student's Personal Relationships Need Intentional Consideration for Success

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Abstract

A counselor's relationship skills are required to be exceptional, regardless of his/her therapeutic orientation. Often, counselors can build quality therapeutic relationships, yet struggle in their personal relationships. Review of current research and qualitative experiences of counselors and their partner relationships are presented. The unique experience of the relationship between a counselor and his/her partner is discussed. Strategies are explored for building a healthy relationship, including setting goals to build resilience in the counselor/partner relationship. The implications for graduate counselor programs is introduced, including suggestions that will benefit students in their relationships at the beginning, middle, and end of their graduate counselor training.

In the counseling profession, the relationship skills of a counselor need to be exceptional, regardless of the counselor's therapeutic orientation. Research evidence indicates that the counselor's ability to build an effective therapeutic relationship is more important than the theoretical approach in determining a positive client outcome (Wampold, 2001). Even if counselors can build effective therapeutic relationships, they may struggle in their personal relationships. Since relationship building skills are essential for counselors, the counselor's personal relationships need special consideration, beginning with the graduate school experience and extending beyond graduation. Some researchers have indicated that students in graduate programs may experience relationship difficulties (Gerstein & Russell, 1990) and may even have a higher rate of divorce than the general population (Scheinkman, 1988). Students in graduate programs experience significant stressors, such as financial strain, adjustment to role changes, and lack of time and energy available for their personal relationships. In

addition to these concerns, students in graduate counseling programs have the unique stress of counseling work, which requires the students' own personal and emotional resources—impacting their personal relationships. Overall, students' solid relationship building skills not only benefit their partner relationship, but their counseling relationships as well (Bowen, 1993; Wampold, 2001).

Impact of Graduate Studies on Marital Satisfaction

Literature Review

Most of the research on the impact of graduate school on marital satisfaction is not specific to graduate counseling students. Contextual factors in research, such as graduate program of study, gender of the student and the partner, as well as the culture of the era must be taken into consideration when examining the research. For example, in the 1970s, students in graduate degree programs were predominately male, and their partnerships were characterized by heterosexual marriage. Stebbins' (1974) study included married male students in professional degree programs in engineering, law, medicine, and education. The results indicated that the wives felt isolated while their husbands' were developing a connection with their educational environment. Williams (1977) found the impact of graduate study on marital relationships of men in doctoral degree programs included a decrease in the quality and amount of communication, decreased sexual satisfaction, decreased spousal valuation, an increase in feelings of pressure and worry, and more disagreement on finances than control group couples.

In the last couple of decades, more research involving both male and female graduate students emerged. Sokolski (1995) studied the impact of graduate studies on marriages of men and women students in law, medical, or other graduate degree program. The researchers indicated greater marital satisfaction when both partners were students than in marriages when only one partner was in school. However, there was no difference on marital satisfaction whether the student was male or female. Brannock, Litten, and Smith (2000) found similar results, indicating higher marital satisfaction when both spouses were students. The areas of conflict that affected marital satisfaction during graduate study were philosophy of life, demonstration of affection, and sexual relations (Brannock et al., 2000). Additionally, there was no significant difference in marital satisfaction at the different stages of the program (beginning, middle, and end).

Impact of Graduate Studies on Counselors and Their Partners

Research specifically on the impact of graduate counseling programs on marriage satisfaction is rare. There has been some research in related fields of psychology and marriage and family therapy. Kattenhorn (1982) studied the impact of graduate study in professional psychology on the marriages of male students who had children before they entered graduate school. Positive effects on marriages were reported, indicating the primary causes for personal and marital growth were likely due to the required development of all available sources of strength to deal with the overwhelming stress of the academic and professional project, and the structured therapy experiences (Kattenhorn, 1982). According to Kattenhorn, graduate school in psychology presents a major threat to student marriages and the stability of the family. However, the same stresses which cause conflict and separation among spouses and family members may,

with insight developed through therapeutic experiences, result in improved marital quality and family stability (Kattenhorn, 1982). These results were contrary to earlier research conducted by Looney, Harding, Blotcky, and Branhart (1980) who found that psychotherapists were more likely to have marital discord and failure in their marriages than the general population.

Legako and Sorenson (2000) studied the impact on marriage in a Christian psychology graduate school from the student's spouse's perspective. They found the graduate training had a detrimental effect on student's marriages due to the accumulating stress of graduate study (Legako & Sorenson, 2000). Although the stress of graduate school had a negative effect on the marriage, the student's spouse experienced his/her partner as more expressive and emotionally accessible. Other research has indicated that the lack of time and energy for the couple or family due to graduate studies in marriage and family therapy programs is detrimental to marital satisfaction (Sori, Wetchler, Ray & Niedner, 1996). Kardatzke (2009) researched perceived stress, adult attachment, and dyadic coping and marital satisfaction of counseling graduate students, and found that graduate students with anxious and avoidant attachment styles of relationships were less satisfied with their marriage relationship. Based on the research, training and support in graduate programs is suggested to increase the dyadic coping for couples.

Graduate study represents a major life transition and the experiences of one family member impacts and requires adjustment for all members (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). The stresses of graduate school in general such as financial strain, limited sexual relations, communication problems, lack of leisure and recreational time, and restricted social life impacts both partners in the relationship. Counselor training involves specific stressors which impact both students and their family members, especially their intimate partner. For example, graduate counseling studies requires students to personally reflect on their past and current family relationships. The students' increasing relational awareness can result in the desire to make changes in their relational behaviors, as well as asking for their partners to make changes. The students' partners may not desire change or may not be prepared to adapt to changes in the relationship.

Factors Contributing to Divorce for Counselors and Their Partner Relationships

Specific behavioral patterns have been identified in marital relationships which could contribute to divorce for counselors in training. Quinn (2002) identified five patterns which contribute to divorce during graduate school; 1) level of spousal support and emotional unavailability, 2) communication skills of both partners, 3) adaptability to change in the relationship, 4) sense of autonomy and personal satisfaction, and 5) the need to be involved. The most common stressors are related to money, time spent away from spouse, and work. The lack of support or emotional availability can be covert or overt. Covert lack of support may involve passive aggressive behaviors, such as emotional unavailability, or attempting to "punish" the student for being away from the family or purposeful absence of invitation in family activities. Overtly, the spouse may ask, "I thought you were already done with that?" or express dissatisfaction about the debt they now share and the fact that the student may have thousands of dollars in student loans. Conversely, relationship success will likely be better when spouses can provide support and remain emotionally available to the counselor in training.

The communication and adaptability skills of both the student and the partner prior to entering graduate school play a big part in the couple's ability to withstand stressors in the process of the graduate school experience. Gottman (1994) identified four "horseman" communication behaviors that play a role in partner relationship breakdown; contempt, criticism, stonewalling, and defensiveness. If these negative interaction patterns were used prior to graduate studies, chances are the couple will have increased problems in communication throughout the graduate student program. During graduate counselor training, the students may be learning about healthy relational communication such as listening, reflecting, and validating feelings—which may be unfamiliar to their partners. At this point, the need for adaptability comes into play. The ability of each partner to adapt to change is crucial. The students may notice "horseman" behaviors and want to change; however, success depends on the students staying focused on their own change process and not trying to change their partners. When students becomes critical or point out their partners' flaws, the partners may view this as controlling or the student trying to change them against their will. Neither partner can maintain a rigid stance against change, or expect too much too soon. It can be a difficult dance while new patterns of communication are being learned.

The level of personal sense of autonomy and life satisfaction can greatly impact the relationship between the counselor and partner. Graduate students may feel an increased sense of autonomy and personal satisfaction based on their participation in graduate studies (Quinn, 2002). Due to the demands of graduate study, there is an increased amount of time alone for both partners, and the ability to fulfill oneself with personal growth and gratifying activities can be an important factor in resiliency. Partners may find themselves with more time to develop interests outside the relationship. For the graduate counseling student, personal autonomy is facilitated by time spent reflecting on life experiences related to personal growth. Students may be growing personally, while their partners may seem stagnant or remain in the same place regarding insight into themselves. The partners may desire to grow personally, but they may have to work harder with their own self-reflection, without the benefit of the support and resources which are available to the students. On the other hand, the students may have less time for restorative activities outside their graduate studies. When there is time for family and friends, the students may actually perpetuate distance in relationships by being unable to talk about or focus on anything else but their learning process (Kuther, 2008).

The need to be involved for both partners can be challenging. Success in relationships during graduate studies requires a balance of involvement from both partners. Students may want to be more involved in their partner's life, with children, family, and friends, but may find it difficult due to time constraints. They enjoy discussing and conceptualizing with others and have a desire to do that with their intimate partner, but may be disappointed when their partner is not as enthralled with it as they are. Partners want to be more involved with the ever growing and changing student, but find it difficult to relate to the type of growth the counseling student is experiencing and may not fully understand the "why" behind it. The student may feel the constant desire and need to discuss counseling concepts, seeming to be selfish and egocentric. Partners need to be able to stay involved enough to understand what the student is learning, but maintain their own sense of autonomy and life satisfaction.

In summary, there are unique stressors for both the counseling student and the partner. For the student counselor, stressors include the sometimes intense and emotionally charged environment of counseling study, which demands considerable self-reflection, communication skill development and practice, extensive feedback, and performance evaluations. The student may feel unrealistic pressure to perform in relationships by hearing the message, “you are a counselor... you should know (this or that)” or in other words, “counselor heal thyself.” For the partner, stressors may include feeling a demand to change personally in ways that were not expected and may think (or say!) “You signed up for this, not me.” Partners may feel they are being judged or evaluated relationally by their partner, and may think (or say) “I don’t want to be psycho-analyzed.” The gap in rates of personal growth, and grieving the loss of the relationship the way it was before graduate school may be feelings experienced by both partners in the relationship.

Resilience Factors That Contribute to Relationship Success

Graduate students and their partners may have risk factors in their relationship that need repair. Equally important is resilience and strengths that help couples survive, and maybe even thrive in the midst of the graduate school storm. Research specific to relationship resilience can be beneficial to building a successful counselor partner relationship. Saakvitne and Pearlman (1996) identified factors that contribute to the overall amount of resiliency that a couple has as sexual attractiveness, education levels and similarity, emotional stability, encouragement and flexibility, adaptability, strong sense of self within the relationship, and the ability to express needs. Grover, Leftwich, Backhaus, Fairchild, and Weaver (2006) identified six qualities of successful graduate students: a) intelligence; b) strong work ethic; c) motivation; d) dedication, determination, and persistence; e) critical thinking; and f) creativity.

Burns (2012) suggested that these qualities for success in graduate school also apply to successfully managing relationships during graduate school. For example, a student demonstrates intelligence, motivation, and creativity by applying knowledge about person-centered therapy and communication skills to his/her current partner relationship. The partner relationship will benefit from the student’s demonstration of effective communication, using the core conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness (Rogers, 1957). Hard work and determination is necessary for students to maintain work-life balance, such that they can accomplish all they need to for school, while taking care of their personal needs and still contributing to the life of their family.

The concept of wisdom, which is related to counselor development and successful counseling relationships (Hanna & Ottens, 1995) is a beneficial framework for integrating the intrapersonal and interpersonal skills necessary for relationship success (Osterlund, 2011). Wisdom is defined as a set of cognitive, affective, and reflective personal characteristics that are interactive, as well as both interpersonal and intrapersonal in nature (Sternberg, 1998). Osterlund (2011) organized wisdom traits by six conceptual categories; cognitive ability, insight, reflective attitude, concern for others, real-world skills, and emotional intelligence. These wisdom traits of the counselor were found to significantly impact the counseling relationship. The finding that wisdom traits

of the counselor significantly impact the counseling relationship could have important implications for people's wisdom abilities in their partner relationships. Wisdom abilities such as understanding multiple perspectives, expressing concern for others, and recognizing subtexts in interpersonal relationships would be beneficial in interpersonal relationships. Wisdom includes social intelligence, which is an important aspect of the wisdom of the counselor, and can be applied to personal as well as counseling relationships.

Goleman (2006) defined social intelligence as including social awareness and social ability. Social awareness involves empathy, concern for others, attunement to others, and social cognition, which is to know how the social world works (Goleman, 2006). According to Goleman social ability builds on social awareness to allow smooth, effective interaction with others. Not only can counselors be aware of and practice these traits when interacting with clients, but these skills can be practiced with clients, and in turn applied to other significant relationships. Couple relationships could be transformed by such other-centered approaches to interacting. Wisdom could be experienced as beneficial to building intimacy and resolving conflicts when couples communicate with each other.

Wise Strategies for Resiliency in Counselor Partner Relationships

In order to weather the storm of the experience of counseling graduate studies, strategies must be employed for addressing problems and creating resilience in the relationship. As a primary strategy for relationship success, partners in the relationship can examine each of the traits of wisdom and identify areas of strength and growth both together and individually; cognitive ability, insight, reflective attitude, concern for others, real-world skills, and emotional intelligence.

Counselor and Partner Cognitive Ability

Wisdom is not mere intelligence, but includes humility—the ability to know one's limits of knowledge (Hanna & Ottens, 1995). Cognitive ability is defined by the intelligence necessary for problem-solving, including logical thinking and good reasoning ability, as well as tacit or implicit knowledge and life experience (Sternberg, 1998). The graduate counseling student is actively involved in studies, which is increasing academic knowledge in addition to acquiring interpersonal skills to work in counseling. In partner relationships, sometimes problem-solving and roles are determined by personal strengths or preferences. For example, one partner may manage the finances while the other enjoys cooking. If dissatisfaction or inequities exist, the couple needs to address balancing roles and responsibilities, especially when there is the added stressor of graduate school.

Relationship satisfaction has been linked to similar education levels (Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996), and there is potential to grow apart while one person is in graduate school and the other is not. Individually, each person in the relationship must be aware of his/her personal satisfaction with his/her educational level. If dissatisfaction is present, each person must take responsibility for his/her educational goals. In the partner relationship, this may require give and take, while the graduate counseling student is attaining higher education, the partner may pursue educational goals of his/her own, either formally or informally. Informally, the partner can learn about concepts important

to the partner relationship, as well as pursuing knowledge in other areas of interest. Psychologically-minded and research-oriented books on relationships, such as those written by John Gottman, could be suggested for counseling students and their partners to read. In summary, successful intelligence in a relationship involves both partners practicing humility, admitting limitations of knowledge, as well as taking responsibility for their own level of education and knowledge.

Counselor and Partner Real-World Skills

The cognitive abilities identified above are realized through real-world skills. Real-world skill requires judgment, the tolerance of ambiguity, as well as the ability to think about thinking, known as metacognition (Hanna & Ottens, 1995; Sternberg, 1985). In relationships, real-world skills are necessary in order to communicate effectively and resolve conflicts. Judgment requires knowing what is important, and what is not, at any given place and time. For example, the partner relationship may be a priority for each individual, but there may be seasons in life (such as during graduate school) when other priorities take precedent temporarily.

In counseling, students must learn to tolerate “not knowing” and the view that problems have multiple solutions. In partner relationships, individuals must be able to manage their anxiety during the transitions of life. For example, graduate studies will result in changes for students and their relationships, but the exact nature of the changes is unknown in advance. The attachment style of the individual can determine the ability to manage fear and anxiety in the relationship. In a study on marital satisfaction and counseling graduate students, Kardatzke (2010) found that attachment anxiety and avoidance was correlated with marital dissatisfaction. Therefore, each individual in the relationship can assess his/her attachment style, and seek to resolve issues which interfere with a strong, secure attachment and the ability to manage anxiety in the relationship.

Counselor and Partner Reflective Attitude

A reflective attitude involves learning from ideas and the environment, being receptive or open to new ideas, recognizing the importance of ideas, and learning from mistakes (Sternberg, 1985). Graduate counseling students are asked to reflect on their own life experiences, resulting in gaining personal awareness and insight. The ability to self-reflect results in gaining insight about a life experience that enhances purpose and meaning in life (see insight below). For some, this can deepen their faith or spiritual connectedness to God, self and/or others. Reflectivity is sometimes painful, especially if it involves thinking about life events that were hurtful or traumatic. Reflectivity is not necessarily something everyone looks forward to practicing. Self-reflection is similar to exercise; no pain, no gain. A reflective attitude may come naturally to someone interested in becoming a counselor. In relationships, growth in this area could be more challenging for the non-counselor partner, unless the partner is motivated to participate in self-reflective activities on a regular basis.

Self-reflectivity can be limited by the inability to receive feedback. The counselor and the partner can increase openness to feedback in supervision, simply by thinking about and discussing personal awareness. Education on the Johari Window can be useful to the partner, so the couple can talk about the different aspects of consciousness depicted by the Johari window (Hanson, 1973). The four quadrants of the Johari window are the

open area, the blind area, the hidden area, and the unknown area. The open area represents what people know about themselves and shares with others. The blind area is the area that others (such as the counselor's partner or clients) may know, but the person is unaware. The hidden area is the area of personal knowledge that is unknown to others, usually requiring a certain level of trust in a relationship to be revealed. And finally, the unknown area is the unconscious aspect, unknown to self and others. When discussing the Johari window, the goal is to increase the open area through feedback and self-discovery, which builds the relationship. The couple can explore the blind areas which impact their relationship. For counselors, the blind areas which could impact their work with clients could be discussed in supervision or personal counseling.

Giving and receiving feedback is oftentimes easier said than done. In order to remain open to feedback, both partners need to feel supported and trust that the feedback is not harmfully intended. The couple may struggle with how best to give feedback so that it is well-received. Utilizing self-reflectivity, both individuals can sort out what fits and what doesn't fit when a feedback message is given by the other person. This process can be enhanced using the Corrective Feedback Instrument – Revised (CFI-R; Hulse-Killacky, Orr, & Paradise, 2006) as a launching point for discussion. The CFI-R is a self-assessment tool which helps the therapist-in-training identify difficult experiences with feedback by reflecting on questions such as, *"I feel criticized when I receive corrective feedback"* or *"Because my childhood memories of corrective feedback are negative ones, I am very sensitive about receiving corrective feedback now."* The couple can open the discussion by describing their own experiences with receiving and giving feedback.

The couple can use the Johari Window and the CFI-R to give context to their discussion on reflectivity. The couple needs to intentionally bring into the conversation differences in cultural expectations and experiences related to reflectivity. The couple relationship provides a unique opportunity for feedback, and through self-reflection, the counselor and the partner grow deeper in self-knowledge. Additionally, the ability of the counselor to self-reflect is the key to development as a therapist.

Counselor and Partner Insight

Insight is defined in terms of perspicacity, or the ability to see through the obvious and grasp underlying meaning. Insight involves self-knowledge and reflectivity of one's own ideas and motives, as well as using intuition to understand another's perspective and motives (Sternberg, 1985). Insight is interconnected to reflectivity (see above). In the counseling relationship, the counselor must be able to discern the nature of client's problems, sometimes relying on instinct to guide his/her inquiry and support for the client. The ability to listen to the content and process during counseling is sometimes called "listening with a third ear."

In partner relationships, sometimes listening with the third ear can be helpful by discerning what is being implied in communication and asking for clarification. However, sometimes this can create problems if the counselor partner is too often interpreting or "reading into" conversations and trying to decipher underlying meanings. This may be a growth area for the non-counseling partner who isn't particularly self-reflective, or remains unaware of his/her own motivations and how they impact others. Self-responsibility and self-knowledge, when it comes to reflectivity and insight, can have a tremendously positive effect on partner relationships.

Counselor and Partner Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is defined in terms of self-awareness or the ability to know one's emotions and self-management, which requires management of emotions and motivating oneself (Goleman, 1995). Emotional intelligence has been identified as a resilience factor in relationships (Goleman, 2006, Gottman, 1994). Emotional intelligence involves the ability to experience and manage a wide range of emotion (happiness, sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety) within oneself. When partners can communicate and validate each other on an emotional level, they can achieve a greater sense of closeness. In a healthy relationship, individuals recognize and take responsibility for their own emotions. Many times a relationship conflict is the result of unresolved feelings, which need to be validated, rather than a problem that needs to be solved. Partners who want to learn more about their emotional and social intelligence can read books written by Daniel Goleman.

Counselor and Partner Concern for Others

Concern for others is defined by sagacity, or the deep understanding of another. A person demonstrating concern for others has a sense of humor, kindness and interest in others, the ability to see another's perspective, and understand the feelings of another person (Sternberg, 1985). The qualities of care, altruism and compassion are given meaning in the context of our relationships. A sense of humor, being able to laugh at oneself is an important aspect of wisdom, and relationship success. Personality differences and what Gottman (1994) calls "unsolvable" problems exist in every relationship. Perpetual problems will likely resurface during times of stress, such as graduate school. Success in a partner relationship is a matter of having the ability to accept and appreciate individual differences. Partners can discover patterns of conflict or perpetual problems in the relationship, and find ways to understand and validate their partner's perspective – even if they don't agree.

In the partner relationship, concern for another can be manifested in physical and emotional care. In the partner relationship, the sexual needs of each partner require intentional consideration, especially with graduate studies in addition to other life demands. In the sexual relationship, each partner can take responsibility for his/her needs and wants, and for expressing these to the partner. The sexual relationship (just like finances!) can be one of the most difficult areas for couples to communicate.

In summary, both the counseling student and the non-counseling partner can identify strategies—based on the development of these wisdom traits – to succeed in their relationship. Counselor education programs need to bridge the gap to help counselors build resiliency into their personal relationships. The relationship skills being developed in counselors will benefit their therapeutic counseling relationships, in addition to the relationships with the counselors' partners (Osterlund, 2011).

Implications for Counselor Education and Supervision

In an effort to build counselors' relationship skills in each area of wisdom, counseling programs can intentionally incorporate wisdom concepts throughout their curriculum, from admissions through graduation. For example, many programs conduct an interview process which requires that the applicant demonstrates an aptitude for

effective communication and relationship building skills. To identify more specific relational abilities, programs can incorporate the assessment of wisdom-related abilities into their interview process. Throughout the academic core of the program, self-reflective activities are required for students to assess their strengths and weaknesses in their personal relationships with others. Programs can take this a step further by offering opportunities for students to include their partners in learning about their relationship together through support groups and workshops. Based on this article, the workshop/support group topics include:

1. Interactive presentations on information presented in this article; including research information on the impact of graduate training on couple relationships; emotional and social intelligence (Goleman 1995 & 2006); wisdom in relationships (Osterlund, 2011); building resilience into the relationship.
2. Self-Assessments; 4 Horsemen (Gottman, 1994); Corrective Feedback Instrument (CFI-R); Attachment Styles; Approaches to Conflict; Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).

In addition to couple's support groups, a separate support or therapy group for the student's partner would provide the opportunity for additional curative factors of group therapy, such as sharing common experiences, practicing new skills, and problem-solving (Yalom, 1995). Graduate counseling programs can offer interactive workshops with counseling students and their partners together in an effort to help them to identify stressors and build reliance within their relationship. The personal traits and relationship skills which contribute to and interfere with relationship satisfaction of counselors and their partners can be presented. Effective relationship skills based on wisdom traits of the counselor and his/her partner can be presented, as well as methods to develop the essential relationship skills. Participants can identify goals for personal growth based on what they learned in this program and develop a plan to build resilience into their relationships. Program resources will determine whether support groups and workshops are offered by program faculty or counseling professionals in the community.

Lastly, couples counseling or psychotherapy services can be recommended to students and their partners to enhance their personal relationships, as well as their abilities as a counselor.

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