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What *else* are psychotherapy trainees learning? A qualitative model of students' personal experiences based on two populations

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Abstract

After an introductory course in experiential-integrative psychotherapy, 21 graduate students provided personal narratives of their experiences, which were analyzed using the grounded theory method. Results produced 37 hierarchically organized experiences, revealing that students perceived multiple changes in both professional (i.e., skill acquisition and learning related to the therapeutic process) and personal (i.e., self growth in a more private sphere) domains. Analysis also highlighted key areas of difficulties in training. By adding the personal accounts of graduate trainees, this study enriches and extends Pascual-Leone et al.'s (2012) findings on undergraduates' experiences, raising the number of cases represented in the model to 45. Findings confirm the model of novice trainee experiences while highlighting the unique experiences of undergraduate vs. graduate trainees.

Keywords: psychotherapy training; self development; training difficulties; counseling skills; qualitative research

Several authors candidly state that the theory and research on training novice psychotherapists is fairly outdated (Hill & Lent, 2006; Hill, Stahl, & Roffman, 2007), while others observe psychotherapy training as an area of renewed interest (Hilsenroth, Defife, Blagys, & Ackerman, 2006). Indeed, although the field needs updating, it seems as though a new focus is also emerging, since past research has almost exclusively focused on skill achievement as a measure of outcomes. Thus, while the topic of training has received more attention than any other therapist variable (Beutler et al., 2004), the nature of *the training experience itself* has received very little attention over the past two decades (Orlinsky & Rønnestad, 2005). This absence of knowledge is particularly striking given two observations: firstly, that variation in outcome across treatments is smaller than variation in outcome among therapists (Wampold, 2001); and second, mounting research suggests that model therapists embody particular personal qualities and somehow integrate their personal way of being into their professional lives (Harrison & Westwood, 2009; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

One of the main models of professional development in the field has been developed through qualitative research by Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003);

they described six phases of professional development from several dimensions (subjective experience of trainees, cognitive styles, learning tasks, etc.). First the model describes a pre-training phase called the lay helper, followed by the beginning student (i.e., novice therapists), then advanced students (often working in practica or internships)—followed by three more phases related to professional (post-graduate) development. In this inquiry of career development, Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) indicated the role of personal development as a pervasive component of professional development.

Since the work of Rønnestad and Skovholt, a few other inquiries have begun to look beyond simple skills acquisition to consider what “else” novice trainees might be learning (e.g., their more personal changes) during the first exposure to therapy training. The rationale for studying novice trainees, in particular, follows from the argument that early stages in training have seen the most dramatic changes in training effects regarding growth in therapeutic confidence, and better management of the emotional demands that training places on therapists, among other factors (Folkes-Skinner, Elliott, & Wheeler, 2010). Perhaps the most seminal of papers on this topic has been Hill, Sullivan, Knox, and Schlosser (2007): Their qualitative analysis examined the

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journal entries of five graduate trainees, in which trainees reflected on their training-related experiences. A chief aim of that study was to shed light on whether the foci of a given training program actually fit the developmental needs of trainees. Findings revealed that, in their role as therapists, graduate students experienced gains in their ability to help clients explore and to facilitate insights using specific techniques. They also gradually felt less anxious, more effective, better suited to the role, and more able to connect with clients. At the same time the challenges these graduate trainees reported included self-criticism about their competence, training-related anxiety, having difficult reactions to clients or not feeling at ease in the therapist role, and difficulties in learning or actually using the helping skills. Findings also spoke to trainees' reactions to supervision, and other experiences intended to foster professional growth. The Hill, Sullivan et al. paper, however, did not inquire directly about more private or personal life changes which might have been experienced by novice trainees outside the clinical context and beyond the student's role as a therapist.

Recent work has explored how student trainees go about formulating their own personally integrative models of psychotherapy (Fitzpatrick, Kovalak, & Weaver, 2010), or offered a detailed case study of one trainee's personal account (Folkes-Skinner et al., 2010). The general argument for this line of study is that relatively little is actually known about the personal and covert experiences of novice therapists in training. Yet, while learning interventions is surely an important part of development, knowing more about both therapists' encounters with early training and the impact of that training on the *personal* sphere could open up critical avenues for the development of more effective training models.

Indeed, as described by Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003), learning more about the covert changes experienced by counselors during their early development would assist in advancing the way we educate therapists as well as improve the quality of their supervision. Related to this, understanding the subjective developmental process of trainees would help in setting realistic demands in their graduate clinical training. Finally, graduate training is a challenging undertaking, and given that practicing counseling skills requires a very personal involvement, knowing more about students' experiences in their training process could help evade problems such as incompetence, impairment, burnout, or disillusionment (Orlinsky & Rønnestad, 2005).

Further to this, there is a compelling rationale to be made for exploring psychotherapy training as an exercise in *personal* (not just professional) development. Indeed, a broader inquiry of personal *life*

changes is likely to encompass both the identified experiences of covert training gains and struggles (see Hill, Sullivan et al., 2007; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003) but should also capture important personal changes experienced by trainees "outside the therapy office."

Psychotherapy Training as an Exercise in Personal Development

While a given treatment approach may be essential, a number of studies have indicated that professional therapists rely on experience, intuition, and human sensitivity far more than technique and expertise (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Studies of master therapists have revealed they have multiple non-skill-related qualities in common, including maturity, emotional receptiveness, and mental healthiness, among others (Harrison & Westwood, 2009; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999). For this reason, some researchers have begun to theorize about the need to teach non-helping skills components to graduate students, such as a focus on self-awareness (Hill, Stahl et al., 2007). While more could be done in this regard, many supervisors would already argue that therapists in training develop beyond the straight application of techniques. Indeed, both humanistic and psychodynamic schools have explicitly highlighted personal development as a goal that is concomitant to technical training (Binder, 1999; Geller, Norcross, & Orlinsky, 2005; Greenberg & Goldman, 1988; Pascual-Leone & Andreescu, *in press*; Rogers, 1961). Still, little research has empirically demonstrated or substantively described these "other goals."

Ideally, training cultivates one's personal and relational qualities, such as emotional maturity, empathic attunement, and the ability to internally manage one's own difficulties during an interpersonal encounter (Fauth, Gates, Vinca, & Boles, 2007). In this sense, therapist training can act as a sort of "therapy" in and of itself, insofar as it offers an exercise of self-development in the personal qualities required to be an effective therapist (Pascual-Leone, 2012). Even so, this understanding of the training process has been largely taken for granted by some, and overlooked by others. If, as most trainers seem to agree, personal development is an important component to a therapist's professional growth (Fauth et al., 2007; Geller et al., 2005), then research is needed to elaborate the types of personal, interpersonal, and reflexive changes that trainees undergo as a critical, albeit largely undeclared, product of psychotherapist training.

The Current Study: An Integrated Understanding of Novice Training Experiences

The current study examines graduate students in a skills-based course on experiential-integrative psychotherapy. As in the work by Hill, Sullivan et al. (2007), this course provided a circumscribed context in which to explore trainees' experiences and to better understand the impact of such a course beyond the more commonly anticipated acquisition of skills. The present study employed a qualitative method of inquiry to pursue this open-ended exploration of change. Yet, while prior qualitative research (i.e., Hill, Sullivan et al., 2007) has focused on "feeling and concerns about becoming a therapist," the general question in our study extended to personal as well as professional gains. In other words: What changes, broadly speaking, do trainees attribute to being in an experiential psychotherapy skills course; and what do students consider the course's impact on their personal lives?

Furthermore, the current study follows on the heels of a paper by Pascual-Leone, Wolfe, and O'Connor (2012), by replicating their course design and extending their findings. The initial (2012) study analyzed the self-reflections of 24 senior undergraduate trainees in order to explore the effect a psychotherapy skills course had on their personal lives and professional development. The qualitative findings produced a model of understanding based on trainees' self-reports, and richly detailed trainees' personal changes in two overarching domains: *Professional development* (e.g., the experiences of skills acquisition, emerging professional identity, confidence while working in-session, etc.), and *Self-development* (e.g., newfound ways of relating to others, becoming more sensitive as a person, improvements in one's romantic life, etc.). These findings from the 24 undergraduate students echoed many of the themes of professional development and training difficulties previously identified in research (e.g., Folkes-Skinner et al., 2010; Hill, Sullivan et al., 2007; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). However, many of the *self-development* themes described by Pascual-Leone et al. (2012) were new to the literature (note: given that the current study is a replication and extension, the 2012 findings are also detailed below in the results of this paper). Furthermore, as far as we are able to determine, no other studies exist that provide such a broad model for understanding the range of student training experiences, bridging together both personal and professional domains.

Even so, while about a third of the students in the original (2012) study eventually went on to pursue training in graduate schools and counseling

programs (i.e., clinical psychology, social work, grief or addiction counseling programs), the majority did not intend to follow such a career path. Educational research has shown that students' motivations, expectations, and goals influence their learning experiences and performance (Simons, Dewitte, & Lens, 2004). This begs the question of whether the original model can be generalized to graduate students in a professional program whose aims differ from those of undergraduate students (a hypothesis also put forward by Hill, Stahl et al., 2007). Thus, pursuant to this research program, the aim of the current study was to enrich a previous grounded theory model (originally based on undergraduate trainees) by confirming and then extending it (as needed) using a sample of graduate-level trainees enrolled in a clinical program.

The Conceptual Development of an Existing Grounded Theory Model

Like many approaches to qualitative research, grounded theory analysis is initially conducted on a target sample. Cases from the selected sample are added to an ongoing analysis, progressively enriching a theory until that understanding is developed enough, such that it comes to stabilize and no further categories or meaningful themes can be extracted from the data. This closure to the qualitative analysis, where additional cases are no longer required from the target sample, is referred to as *theoretical saturation* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rennie, Phillips, & Quartaro, 1988).

In keeping with the grounded theory method, the abovementioned (Pascual-Leone et al., 2012) model of trainee experiences reached saturation and was determined to be sufficiently complete. However, as methodologists have argued (i.e., beginning with Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a grounded theory model will often benefit from constant refinement. One approach is to explore the same theme with a radically different sample, but this will often require the development of entirely distinct models (e.g., see Jennings et al.'s (2008) cross-cultural comparison of independent qualitative models regarding therapist expertise).

Thus, instead, we opted to explore the limits of a pre-existing model, by adding cases of graduate students that were sufficiently similar in characteristics and context to those in the original sample (i.e., Pascual-Leone et al.'s senior undergraduates). Both samples had comparable levels of prior training (or lack thereof) and would be described as students beginning the novice phase in Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2003) model of professional development. Furthermore, the original undergraduate and

new graduate samples are similar, for instance, in that on average they are only 2 to 3 years of age apart, with comparable demographics, and they enjoyed identical course content, supervisor, classroom setting, etc., so the original model might reasonably apply. At the same time, however, these two training samples were sufficiently different in a key aspect of interest to our research: The current study examines graduate trainees who, unlike undergraduates, were enrolled in a professional program and, as such, are presumably better equipped to make use of psychotherapy skills training, and were committed to pursuing a career in clinical psychology. This offers an opportunity to expand and generalize the model of early training experiences while being observant of group differences in a way that speaks directly to the structure of most training programs.

Method

Participants

The graduate counselors in training were 22 graduate students beginning a Masters in an APA-accredited clinical psychology program and enrolled in an introductory psychotherapy skills training course. The course was run for two consecutive years so that participants in this study came from one of two cohorts (each with 11 students). The study sample (combining participants from both cohorts, less one case of missing data) was 21 graduate trainees, composed of 18 female and three male participants. Their ages ranged from 22 to 48 ($M = 25.4$), on average they had 5.2 years of university education, and 81.8% identified themselves as Caucasian. For comparison: The original model described in Pascual-Leone et al. (2012) was of 24 undergraduate trainees (18 female, six male), ages ranging from 21 to 41 ($M = 23$), an average of 3.5 years of university education majoring in psychology, and 79% identified as Caucasian.

Psychotherapy Training Course

The course curriculum, format, and trainer were all identical to those used by Pascual-Leone et al. (2012). Over a 13-week course, the class met for one 3-hour class per week. Psychotherapy training was given using an integrative framework with a strong emphasis on experiential psychotherapy. The course was structured such that students were given weekly lectures on concepts and basic experiential intervention, video demonstrations of therapy, and discussion of readings, and they participated in informal supervised practice sessions with their

peers. In addition, students were assigned weekly journals, which provided them with an opportunity to contemplate course-related experiences. There were assignments distributed throughout the semester, the purpose of which was to increase students' awareness of productive therapeutic processing. These assignments entailed trainees writing personal narratives and then also subjecting their narratives to a range of psychotherapy process measures, such as the client experiencing scale (Klein, Mathieu-Coughlan, & Kiesler, 1986), the narrative process coding system (Angus, Levitt, & Hartke, 1999) and identifying core conflictual relationship themes (Luborsky, Popp, Luborsky, & Mark, 1994). Thus, process measures were used auto-didactically by students as training tools (these were not research instruments). Moreover, trainees had "formal" skills practice by providing single-session interventions each with eight different "clients" (volunteers from outside the class). Finally, while self-exploration was not an explicit goal of the course, students made use of their own personal life experiences as material during in-class practice with peers and in completing assignments, allowing for potential insights into their private concerns and processes.

Procedures for Data Collection

Data collection procedures were identical to, and conducted under the same conditions as, those used by Pascual-Leone et al. (2012). Thus, after completion of the course, all trainees wrote a self-reflection on their own time, which invited them to consider: (a) "What can I do that I couldn't do before taking this course?" (b) "What new strengths have I developed over the last four months as a counselor?" (c) "What are some of the areas of difficulty I have encountered as a counselor?" (d) "How has this course affected me personally?" Perhaps it has altered perceptions of yourself, others, or relationships; if so, how?" The use of self-reflections written by graduate students at the end of a training course follows the methodological example of Hill, Sullivan et al. (2007). Furthermore, open-ended questions like these are a recommended practice for inviting participants to explore given topics, allowing the researcher to focus on learning what is central to the phenomenon in question (Rennie et al., 1988). Thus, trainees were encouraged to make accounts as reflective of their personal training experience as possible, using the questions only as points of departure. Naturally, the import of the inquiry was not *if* trainees would report any learning/impact, rather the research question was *what kind* of impact might trainees actually notice and report. Finally, a number of precautions were taken to avoid social

desirability bias: i.e., participation was both voluntary and kept confidential from the course instructor, names were removed so that responses remained anonymous to the researchers, and data were only subjected to analysis after course grades had been submitted.

Qualitative Analysis

Researchers and their reflexive position. The first author is a clinical psychologist (PhD) with 10 years experience practicing and teaching experiential psychotherapy. He designed the study and served as an auditor of the primary analyses. The second author is a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology, specialized in training, cross-cultural psychology, and grounded theory methodology. She was fully independent of both the training and data collection procedures, and she conducted the primary qualitative analysis. The third author, also a graduate student in psychology, conducted secondary audits of the data for coherence and consistency in the emerging model. Finally, the researchers' frame of reference assumed experiential work is an important part of therapist training. They also assumed there would be a degree of continuity between the (2012) model of undergraduate trainees and the reported experiences of graduate students in this study.

Methodological context of analysis. Saturation within one study does not imply saturation across slightly different populations, which may yet serve to enrich the model. Thus, through a process that Glaser and Strauss (1967) referred to as *theoretical sampling*, a subsequent inquiry may add new cases, from a slightly different sample, albeit presumably sharing some of the same range in perspective as the initial model building sample. The general idea is that, once a theory/understanding is developed in terms of a selected group of participants, it can then be applied to other people to determine the degree of fit. Furthermore, when the fit is not perfect, new categories of meaning can be created to accommodate these unique meanings. To this end, one objective of qualitative analysis in this paper was to arrive at an expanded and increasingly robust theory or understanding that could suitably account for both the training experiences reported in the original (Pascual-Leone et al., 2012) undergraduate sample as well as the current study's graduate student sample, both of which attended comparable skills training courses.

Grounded theory method. Data were treated in a manner consistent with Rennie's (2006; Rennie

et al., 1988) adaptation of grounded theory method, an inductive, interpretive process used to explore subjective experiences for the purpose of theory generation. First, (1) larger textual responses written by trainees from the current sample were formally broken into *meaning units* (i.e., fragments or smaller quotes of meaning). Then, after an in-depth reading of the parent study, (2a) meaning units from our study were continually compared with previously established categories and themes taken from Pascual-Leone et al.'s model of undergraduate experiences. Thus, the previous (2012) qualitative findings served as a "template of possibilities" to interpret new meaning units and, when they were consistent, these new meanings further populated the already established model themes. However, (2b) when the new meaning units did not seem consistent with the already existing themes, they were compared to other uncategorized meaning units from the same data set, such that units with the same apparent meaning were grouped (i.e., *clustered*) together under a newly emergent theme or common category, to construe the unique features of the current (graduate) data. Therefore, while the categories from the original study were used as an initial template, the meaning units extracted from the graduate sample were not forced into these categories and new categories were still allowed to emerge as needed during the analytical process. (3) Labels for these categories were tentatively generated (or modified) to be descriptive, closely reflecting the language of trainees whose experiences were represented in a given cluster of meaning units. Furthermore, (4) as the researcher continually attempted to identify points of divergence and convergence, how categories related to one another offered a greater understanding of the texts. In order to reflect this structure of meaning, higher-order themes were developed as needed from the clusters of meaning units themselves. (5) This bottom-up synthetic process was documented by using research notes (*memos*) about the emerging relationships among categories. (6) Thus, while taking into account the pre-existing (2012) model the process subsequently moved from thematic categories at lower levels to progressively higher levels of abstraction, revealing higher-order connections among categories. At the same time, in the usual movement of a grounded theory toward parsimony, those novel emerging categories with few connections or representing isolated meaning units were either dropped or collapsed into other categories. (7) This analytical process continued until there was theoretical saturation. (8) The final product was a tentative hierarchy of themes that offered an elaborated theory for understanding the phenomenon.

Credibility checks. In the final steps of model development (steps 9 and 10), several credibility checks were conducted as prescribed by Elliott, Fischer, and Rennie (1999).

(9) Formal audits of model coherence. Given that this study was partially based on a previous classification of meanings, it was important to ensure dependability across the two grounded theory models. After the initial qualitative analysis (by second author), all data were subjected to a formal audit by an independent rater (first author) to appraise the continuity of meaning from the original categories. In this audit the classification of current data in each category was evaluated for its coherence with the original data from the (2012) parent study. This coherence check was not necessary for newly emergent categories. *Secondary audits* were also conducted in which all analyses and supporting data were critically reviewed (by the third author) in the middle and at the end of the analysis, for discrepancies, overstatements, and errors.

(10) Research participant check. In the final stages of model-building, figures and a written draft of our findings were sent (by the third author) to all study participants with an invitation for them to provide comments and personal reactions. In doing this, clear measures were again taken to protect the anonymity of responders and the confidentiality of their comments. In total, 10 participants (nine females, one male) responded with comments that independently confirmed or suggested corrections and elaborations to the findings.

Results

Written statements from the 21 trainees varied in length from 694 to 1309 words. A total of 455 unique meaning units were extracted from the 21 graduate students' statements. These meaning units were grouped into 37 clusters which were in turn compounded to create four hierarchically ordered levels. The present study used categories from Pascual-Leone et al.'s (2012) grounded theory model as a basis for the analysis. For the 25 original model categories and labels that served as a partial template in the current analyses, data audits confirmed that those categories were used coherently across the current and prior models.

In the end, the analytic process revealed some structural differences between the original model and the sample of graduate cases being added in the current study. However, the major themes in which students perceived their changes remained the same, namely: *Professional development*, *Self development*,

and *Training difficulties*. Although training difficulties can be understood as part of professional development, this domain of trainee experience was described extensively enough in the current data that we have chosen to represent it independently. In general, it is also worth noting that graduate trainees (much more than their undergraduate counterparts) made direct links from their personal growth to their professional development.

Finally, to best convey the points of convergence and divergence among data sets and the new discoveries in the present (enriched) model, we have chosen to present the current graduate-trainee results in the context of previous undergraduate findings (from Pascual-Leone et al., 2012). Thus, Figures 1, 2, and 3 provide the number of trainees (from each data set) who reported experiences captured by a given category. While grounded theory models do not typically report the frequency with which participants endorse a given category, there has been a precedent for this (cf., Rennie, 1992). Moreover, the purpose for including this information is to allow the reader a sharper sense of consensus and divergence across the samples, particularly given the unusually large combined sample size (of $N=45$). To present these counts, we followed guidelines proposed by Cooper and Rodgers (2006), and bracketed numbers in a figure in order to specify the number of unique (non-overlapping) participants who were represented in a given theme or sub-theme.

Professional Development

The emergence of this major theme was expected given that the objective of the course was to teach therapy skills to graduate students. Figure 1 presents *Professional Development* and its four second-order themes.

Applied theory and skills. This second-order theme was characterized by the students' achievements in the "how to" of therapy and revealed that nearly all graduate students ($n=20$), reported new process-related skills. As in the original article, two lower-order themes were identified (Figure 1, left side).

Perceiving new aspects of process. This third-order theme showed that most students ($n=14$) developed awareness of client markers as well as a deeper understanding of the client's emotional expressions. This new awareness was reflected by the fourth-order themes: *Noticing new things in therapy* ($n=12$) and *better understanding emerging emotions and needs* ($n=3$), which mirror findings from the undergraduate sample. One noteworthy

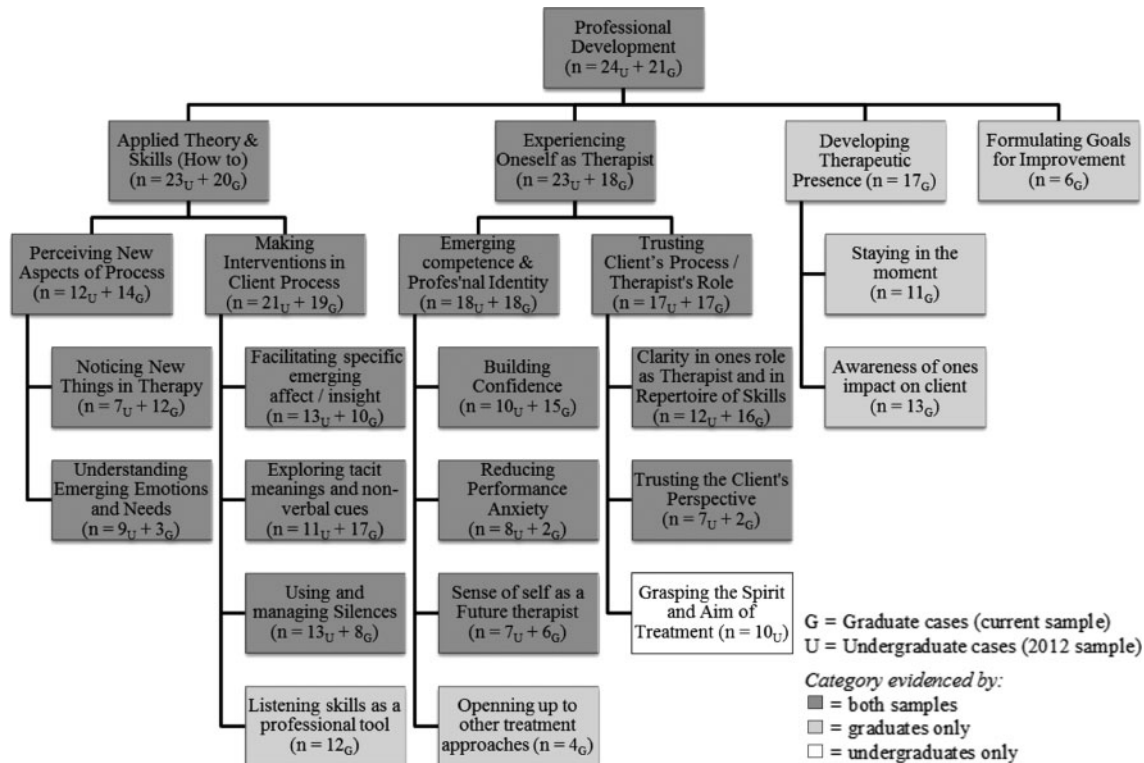


Figure 1. Professional development: Changes reported across 45 cases.

difference between the samples was that while the undergraduate students had focused on their personal lives, these graduate trainees focused more on their interactions while working with their clients.

Making interventions in client process. This third-order theme revealed that, similar to undergraduate students, nearly all of the graduate students in our sample ($n=19$) said they were able to deliberately apply therapeutic techniques in several areas. Three of the four identified areas were consistent with original findings using undergraduates, and include *facilitating specific emerging affect/insight* ($n=10$), feeling more competent in *exploring tacit meaning and non-verbal cues* ($n=17$), and *using and managing silences* ($n=8$). A difference found between the samples in this last area was that while undergraduates seemed to focus on feeling more at ease with silence, graduate students referred to insights about the strategic use of silence. As a case in point, one graduate student said, “I am able to give the client the time that they need to think through, explore, and articulate exactly what it is that they are trying to say, I think I initially interpreted all silence as awkward because I was self-conscious about my abilities and I was eager to display that I was on the ball” (Trainee 0809). Once again, graduate trainees focused more on techniques and client markers, while undergraduate students

focused more on changes in their personal lives. This is illustrated by a fourth unique area reported by half the graduate trainees ($n=12$): using *listening skills as a professional tool*. In this area, trainees made a point of linking their perceived changes to their future professional development, i.e., “I think I am now a more effective listener and I can bring this skill to whatever therapy training I have in the future” (Trainee 0806).

Experiencing oneself as therapist. Similar to the undergraduate sample, nearly all graduate students ($n=18$) reported increased feelings of competency, along with greater clarity regarding their professional identity and their role as therapists (middle-left branch of Figure 1).

Emerging competency and professional identity. Nearly all the graduate students ($n=18$) reported an increase in several areas as a result of taking this course. These areas include a sense of *building confidence and self-efficacy* ($n=15$), *reducing performance anxiety* ($n=2$), feeling more clarity in their career direction and a *sense of self as a future therapist* ($n=6$). These areas are consistent with the reports from the undergraduate sample. However, a new area emerged from our graduate sample, *opening up to other approaches in therapy* ($n=4$), which suggested that some graduate students had already

formed preferences for certain therapeutic approaches. As one student described, “at this point CBT seems a little too cold and distant for me as well, but I doubt I’ll give up on a structured approach all together; perhaps I’ll offer a marriage of emotion and insight” (Trainee 0805). A priori preferences like this seemed to reflect convictions that graduate students had regarding their chosen career paths.

Trusting client’s process and understanding the therapist’s role. Nearly all graduate students ($n = 17$) also gained a better understanding of their role and of client process. The themes within this category were mostly consistent with those found in the undergraduate sample, and included greater clarity in one’s role as a therapist and in the repertoire of skill ($n = 16$) and a new sense of trusting the client’s perspective ($n = 2$). However, in contrast to their more junior counterparts, graduate students did not mention the theme *grasping the spirit and aim of treatment*, which may be due to their having a greater understanding of clinical work. Another difference between the samples was that graduate trainees gave more importance to therapeutic boundaries, the limits of their role as therapists, and placed more emphasis on multicultural sensitivity than the undergraduate trainees.

Developing therapeutic presence. This second-order theme (Figure 1, right side) was unique to the graduate sample and was characterized by nearly all trainees ($n = 17$), describing an increased awareness of themselves in relation to their clients. Around half of the trainees ($n = 11$) described *staying in the moment*, especially when they were feeling anxious or self-conscious. As one student expressed it: “One other thing that I’m learning to do but couldn’t do at all before is to stay present during a negative emotion without necessarily analyzing it or fretting over it” (Trainee 0801). Most trainees ($n = 13$) also acknowledged an increased *awareness of one’s personal impact on the client*. For instance, “I think that knowing this information about myself will help me to relate better with my clients in the future. I know more about how I relate to others and my pattern of needs and wishes in relationships which is good to know because I am more aware of the impact that I might unknowingly have on my clients” (Trainee 0807).

Formulating goals for improvement. This second-order category was also exclusive to graduate trainees ($n = 6$). While some trainees outlined their goals for improvement in relational skills, others disclosed goals for improvement in various techniques. For instance, one student commented: “I need

to work on feeling more comfortable sitting with a client’s painful and negative feelings without wanting to shift topics or make the person feel better” (Trainee 0803).

Training Difficulties

A fundamental part of professional development is facing training difficulties. Nearly all graduate students ($n = 20$) reported specific difficulties while progressing through the course. Moreover, while undergraduate students reported some common technical difficulties, graduate students reported a number of unique areas of difficulty. Training difficulties with skills training are described below (and in Figure 2) in four second-order themes.

Difficulty finding and keeping the focus. Consistent with the undergraduate sample, some graduate trainees reported *feeling tongue-tied* ($n = 6$) and having difficulty finding the right words to express themselves in-session. However, unlike undergraduates, graduate trainees emphasized having difficulty expressing themselves particularly when using specific techniques. Just like the undergraduate sample, some graduate students ($n = 5$) reported feeling they were *lacking direction or focus*. In general, these trainees described feeling unsure as to what part of the client’s narrative to pursue or what other steps to take.

Feeling reticent or ineffective. Some graduate students ($n = 7$), much like the undergraduates, discussed the negative emotions they experienced while conducting therapy sessions. However, there were some differences in the quality of their descriptions. For instance, a few graduate participants ($n = 3$) similarly felt *frustration with guarded clients*. However, unlike undergraduate trainees, who had a tendency to angrily blame their guarded clients, graduates seemed to place an emphasis on working harder in order to help guarded clients open up, even if this sometimes resulted in trainees feeling frustrated as therapists. One graduate stated: “When a client is not very psychologically minded, I find it difficult to maintain a consistent effort in attempting to deepen his or her emotional experiencing with evocative empathic responses” (Trainee 0902). While it was more common among undergraduates, some graduate trainees ($n = 4$) also reported *feeling clumsy and ineffective*, blaming themselves when a client was not very forthcoming.

Struggling with the flow of conversation. This was a unique difficulty identified by most graduate trainees ($n = 13$), although undergraduates may

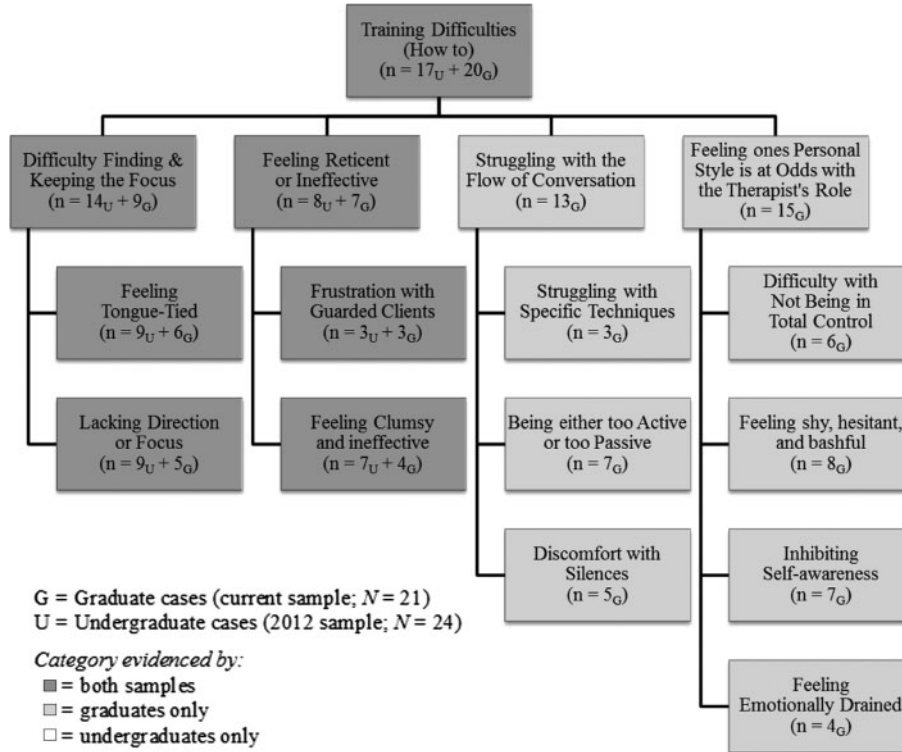


Figure 2. Training difficulties: Challenges reported across 45 cases.

simply not have been able to articulate similar experiences beyond their feeling ineffective. A few of those trainees ($n = 3$) referred to *struggling with specific techniques* as a key concern. More generally, some ($n = 7$) reported difficulties with *being either too active or too passive as a therapist*; in other words, “saying too much” in sessions or “saying too little.” One trainee explained: “I find it difficult to interrupt a client and say anything because I often fear that I will disrupt his or her emotional processing in some way, or that I may appear insensitive” (Trainee 0902). Finally, some trainees ($n = 5$) also made a point of identifying their *discomfort with silence*.

Feeling one’s personal style is at odds with the therapist role. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, this was another kind of difficulty that was uniquely reported by most graduate trainees ($n = 15$). A number of the categories within this theme seemed to reflect graduate students’ self-critical or perfectionist experiences, and self-doubt related to their personal capacity for skills-based (as opposed to purely academic) content. Some trainees ($n = 6$) reported *difficulty with not being in total control*: Tending to be “over-controlling,” feeling a need to “fix” the client, and having a self-imposed imperative against making any mistakes. This was poignantly expressed by one trainee: “Somehow I have it

in my head that they’ve come to see me so that I can fix everything. And I know that isn’t the case, that it would actually be detrimental to try, but I find myself wanting to anyway. My biggest concern has been that I would become too invested in my clients” (Trainee 0906). A second issue that some trainees ($n = 8$) reported was *feeling shy, hesitant, and bashful* when working with a client. As one student disclosed, “I have definitely struggled the most with incorporating my shy, quiet nature into being an effective counselor” (Trainee 0802); while another observed, “I often felt like if I asked too many questions or when I explored how they felt about a certain topic that I was being too intrusive” (Trainee 0910). Furthermore, some trainees ($n = 7$) had difficulty with an *inhibiting self-awareness*, as illustrated by the following quote: “Part of the reason why I found these uncomfortable silences so difficult is likely because of my heightened self-awareness (of my thoughts, feelings, and physical presence) and the fact that this awareness was distracting me from the process and client at hand” (Trainee 0802). Similarly, another trainee wrote: “If I concentrate on being aware of my body language, I seem to lose focus of what the client is saying or doing in the current moment” (Trainee 0810). Finally, some trainees ($n = 4$) found practicing in-class left them *feeling emotionally drained* since they were trying to recall emotionally taxing experiences as well as

open up to their classmates (facets of peer-to-peer in-class practice, which were not actually required of students by the course or trainer).

Self Development

Analysis revealed personal or *self-development* as a final, highest-order, theme. This domain encompassed two second-order themes, shown in Figure 3.

Personal growth. Nearly all graduate trainees ($n = 17$) experienced personal growth in one or two lower-ordered themes, and these had also figured prominently among undergraduates.

Self-understanding and improvement. The graduates' descriptions of a perceived increase in self-understanding and self-improvement were consistent with the undergraduates' experiences and included *positive growth as a person* ($n = 12$), acquiring a *new view of themselves, their needs, and difficulties* ($n = 10$), being *more emotionally aware* ($n = 7$), and *reducing self-criticism and social anxiety* ($n = 3$). It was clear, however, that the graduate students' descriptions enjoyed more detail and placed more emphasis

on respecting and accepting themselves. As one student remarked: "I feel I have moved toward a better acceptance and understanding of myself and my underlying motivations" (Trainee 0903).

Being more sensitive and expressive. It is worth noting that this second-order category was endorsed by just a few graduate students as contrasted with its relative importance among undergraduates. Nevertheless, the nature of reported categories was consistent with the undergraduate sample: Some graduates ($n = 5$) reported personal growth in relationships, depicted by *better articulation of personal needs and emotions* ($n = 3$) and just a couple spontaneously disclosed noticing an *improvement in my love life* ($n = 2$).

Relate to others (both inside and outside therapy). All trainees ($n = 21$) reported an improvement in their abilities to relate to others, mirroring the undergraduate sample. Even so, while the original (undergraduate) categories under this theme often indicated relating to other people in general (sometimes citing specific personal relationships with family, friends, etc.), graduate students tended

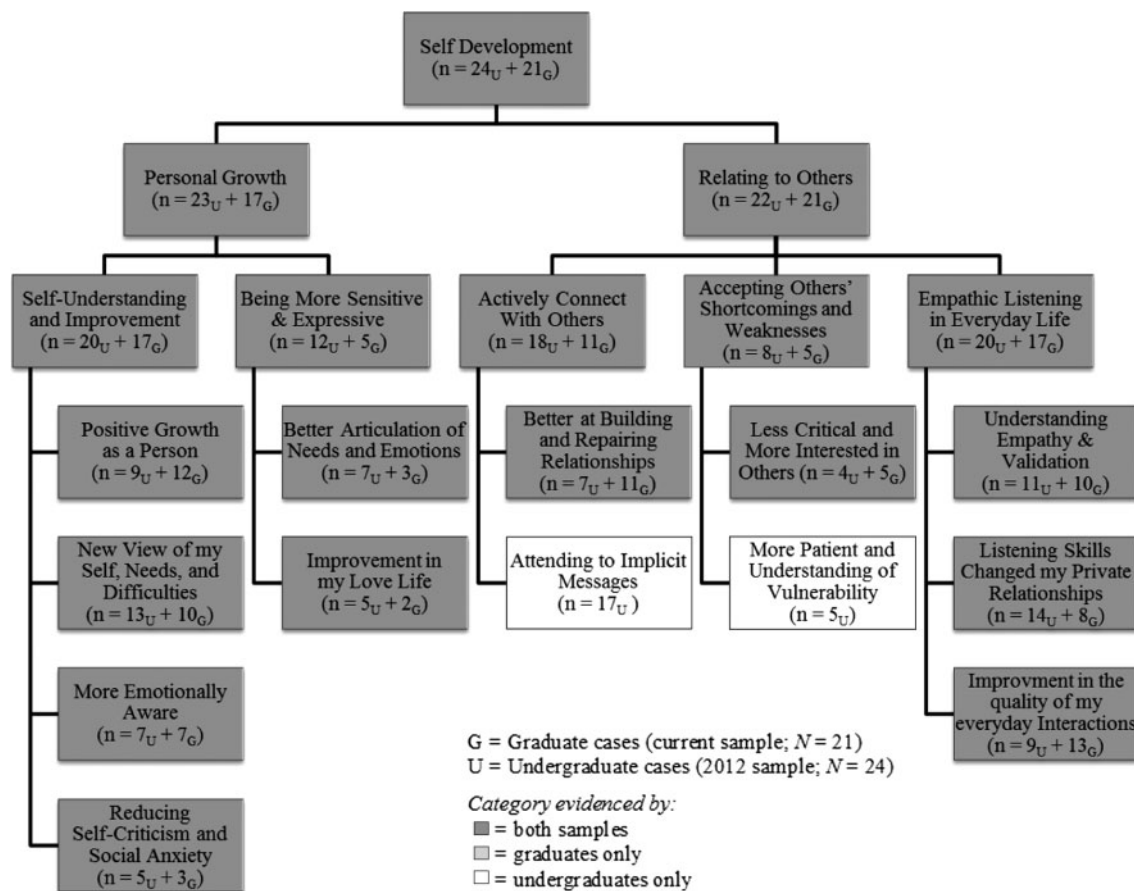


Figure 3. Self-development: Changes reported across 45 cases.

to focus more narrowly on the therapist-client relationship.

Actively connecting with the others. This category is part of a larger cluster that was more strongly represented in the original undergraduate model. Even so, around half of the graduate students ($n = 11$) reported being *better at building and repairing relationships*.

Accepting others' shortcomings and weaknesses. Some graduate trainees ($n = 5$) conveyed an increased sense of empathy, feeling *less critical and genuinely more interested in others*. As one trainee conveyed, "I am increasingly trying to understand people as the integration of their entire history and present environment. This has helped me feel more empathy for others. This sense of compassion seems to emerge unsolicited too" (Trainee 0801). Interestingly, this category was supported by a larger array of meanings in the original (undergraduate) model, such as "being more patient," but such meanings were not echoed as strongly among graduate trainees.

Empathically listening in everyday life. Nearly all trainees ($n = 17$) reported an increased ability to listen in everyday life. In contrast to the undergraduate sample, graduates once again focused largely on their professional development. About half of the graduate students ($n = 10$) reported an improvement in their *understanding, empathy and validation*. In fact, one student recognized how fundamental this was as a technique and said: "I now think that my first mistake was trying to establish that I knew something about her experience because of my knowledge about [workplace injury assessments] generally, when I should have just listened and empathized" (Trainee 0801).

Some trainees ($n = 8$) disclosed that newly acquired *listening skills changed my private relationships*, which was similarly described in the data from undergraduates. As one graduate student revealed: "I feel like I can understand people in my life a lot better than I could before, simply by listening—not just to what they are saying but to what they are *not* saying" (Trainee 0808; original emphasis). Related to this, most graduate (like undergraduate) trainees ($n = 13$) indicated that skills training actually created *improvement in the quality of my everyday interactions in life*. As one student surmised: "The therapeutic skills I have learned in this course have spilled over into my everyday personal life in a very positive manner" (Trainee 0802).

Discussion

A Comprehensive Model of the Training Experience

This study has examined the impact of psychotherapy training based on narrative accounts from 21 graduate students over two separate cohorts, adding (and contrasting) these to an already existing analysis of 24 undergraduate students. Furthermore, although prior research began to explore the covert experience of novice training using relatively small samples, the current findings have produced a broader model for understanding the range of student training experiences, bridging together personal and professional domains. While there were some differences from the original set of categories (based on the 2012 undergraduate sample), the study of graduate trainees essentially provides a very good fit and extension of Pascual-Leone et al.'s model of trainees' experiences of change and the specific training difficulties they report.

Many of the categories found in this study have been described and integrated in Rønnestad and Skovholt's model but this study offers more nuance in the experienced impact of an introductory training course for novice therapists, a phase of training that has been described as the most dramatic (Folkes-Skinner et al., 2010). Theoretical sampling and exploring the limits of a given model using similar yet sufficiently different samples can be viewed as a technique of data triangulation. As such, independent sources of information (in this case, different data sets) provide a better fix on something (training-related changes both inside and outside the treatment session) that is otherwise only partially known. The consolidated model (i.e., Figures 1 to 3) cogently represents the collective experiences described by 45 individual trainees across both graduate and undergraduate levels. Moreover, the graphical representation in the figures (different tones of grey) indicates the conceptual development discovered by adding a graduate sample to the analysis. Further to this, while the data sets were largely convergent, there were some interesting differences that can be interpreted in relation to the populations from which each of the two training samples came. Prior research on differential training effects is mixed, but our findings are consistent with those inquiries that show the effect of early clinical training on senior undergraduates is qualitatively different from that on early graduate students (i.e., Baker & Daniels, 1989).

The theme of "professional development". Improved competence, identity development, confidence, and professional goals were all reported

areas of subjective change that confirmed what is found in the literature (Hill, Sullivan et al., 2007; Folkes-Skinner et al., 2010; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Indeed, quantitative data taken from the same sample (Pascual-Leone & Andreescu, *in press*) further triangulates the qualitatively reported improvements of our graduate students in their technical abilities to establish helping relationships, use interventions, as well as regulate their anxiety and develop a sense of self-efficacy.

While changes to students' technical skills and their sense of themselves as professionals (i.e., Figure 1) have come to be expected in research on training (see Hill & Lent, 2006), the qualitative findings from our program of research also reveal a nuance that seems to open new areas of potential research inquiry and perhaps new strategies for training. One discovery, for example, is that both samples consistently described perceiving new aspects of the process and noticing new things in therapy. This speaks to the development of some kind of *perceptual acuity* (i.e., improved clinical perceptiveness) alongside the more often cited acquisition of intervention skills. Furthermore, while the work of Pascual-Leone and Andreescu (*in press*) discussed improved clinical perceptiveness as an often important albeit undeclared training goal, their research design did not allow for this to be demonstrated. The current data, however, provide qualitative evidence to support perceptual acuity as a real training outcome.

The theme of “training difficulties”. Prior research on the key areas of struggle and change for novice trainees has shown these include feelings about themselves in the role of therapist, awareness of their reactions to clients, learning and using helping skills, and reactions to supervision (Hill, Sullivan et al., 2007). Other evidence supports the notion that several critical incidences related to competence, supervision, role identity, and self-insight affect the development of new trainees (Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006). These conclusions were supported by the general findings presented on *professional development* and *training difficulties*. At the same time, examining Figure 2 shows the range of common (in dark gray) and unique (light gray) *training difficulties* that were richly described by both graduates and undergraduates. We believe this provides a valuable window for supervisors and trainers into problem areas, and in a new way that bridges technical issues with deeply personal, identity-related issues. For example, in addition to the more common concerns with feeling effective or sufficiently focused, or even feeling frustrated with clients, only graduate students disclosed their

personal struggles with shyness, feeling the need to be controlling, or keeping a balance between being too active or too passive in-session. It is possible that these latter concerns were unique to graduate students, although it may be that undergraduates were just less articulate when they cited feeling clumsy or tongue-tied in session.

The theme of “self development”. In what is perhaps the most novel and interesting set of discoveries in this study, the major theme of “self development” described critical but covert changes that trainees experience in their private spheres. Figure 3 seems to fully exercise the aim of qualitative inquiry, in that using this method revealed answers to questions that, as researchers, we may not have thought to ask. Consider, for example, the fact that a small number of both graduates and undergraduates spontaneously and independently indicated that psychotherapy training led to “improvements in my love life.” Indeed, the empirical findings from across 45 detailed accounts provided many examples in robust subcategories that referred to changes in everyday interactions or in private relationships. In sum, the data bring further evidence to how psychotherapy training may facilitate students' self-understanding, being more emotionally aware, positive changes in their intimate personal relationships, and potential characterological developments (i.e., emotional awareness, feeling less critical of others, or having increased empathic openness). Indeed, as foreshadowed by the professional development model of Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003), the content of this self-development theme revealed in specific terms what “else,” other than technical skills and professional knowledge, are psychotherapy trainees learning.

An overall comparison of graduate vs. undergraduate training experiences. Finally, we observe that in adding the personal accounts of graduate students, the major themes of *professional development* and of *training difficulties* were each expanded to a larger extent than that of *self-development*. Even so, these broader domains were endorsed with roughly equal frequency. This seems to suggest that while the impact of psychotherapy training on undergraduate and graduate students may be somewhat different with respect to their experiences of professional development, the described changes in terms of personal growth and relating to others (i.e., *self-development*) seem to be quite similar across the two training populations. Again, in a field that had primarily focused on skills acquisition, this is evidence of otherwise undeclared

changes that seem to be tacitly entailed in psychotherapy training.

Limitations

One of the ways in which the credibility of qualitative research has been defined is the degree to which findings intuitively resonate with readers, such that the formulation strikes a chord for those who share some horizon of understanding with the analyst and with the contributors of source material (Rennie, 2006). Even so, we must first acknowledge that our results are, in the end, based on a single training program and with a specific trainer. As such it may be difficult to generalize (or compare) these results to other training contexts, particularly those that are exclusively cognitive, or psychodynamic in their approaches, or that have less of an integrative/experiential approach, or that simply have a different instructor. By the same token, although both content and delivery of the training were held constant across graduate and undergraduates courses, any comparisons between the samples must also acknowledge that being in a “program” may have influenced the experience of graduate students. For example, one can expect they spent more time with peers, and presumably talked more about their class experiences than undergraduates did. Another issue in studies that use subjective reports of change is that simply asking participants to reflect on their experiences may actually increase their reflexivity and consequently their personal and professional growth. Even so, the range of robustly identified themes and the fact that undergraduates and graduates responded somewhat differently lends credibility to the data collected.

Future Directions and Implications for Trainers

Assembling data that richly describe the experiences of 45 novice therapists, from two qualitative studies, into a single model also offers something to methodology. In psychotherapy research, qualitative inquiry has been predominantly focused, indeed almost exclusively, on “discovery.” However, our approach to theoretical sampling (cf., Glaser & Strauss, 1967) offers a way to extend a given framework of understanding, developing it across samples or sites in a programmatic fashion, rather than moving from one topic of analysis to another. We believe this procedure has improved the theory, and increased its credibility. Furthermore, graphically illustrating a model’s variegation across populations, as we have done in this paper, is an innovation for easily discussing the degree of overlap and critical moments of contrast in

qualitative observations made within the same scope of understanding.

In light of the relative importance of therapist factors (Wampold, 2001), and given the important role that a therapist’s personal development is believed to play in cultivating skilled therapists (Folkes-Skinner et al., 2010; Geller et al., 2005; Hill, Stahl et al., 2007; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003), the current findings could help direct future research on the lesser-known factors and covert processes of self-development. Knowing these results also has implications for supervisors and trainers insofar as it provides a detailed account of the precise difficulties experienced by trainees in their own words. It should also sensitize trainers to the otherwise undeclared impact of this kind of training on students’ personal lives. Finally, the combined findings offer a deeper understanding of professional and personal growth as it shifts differentially across levels of training. Future experimental research on novice trainees could use the current model of understanding to strategically explore chosen dimensions of self-development, doing this more deliberately and perhaps more incisively than before.

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