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A Heuristic Phenomenological Inquiry Of Counseling Graduate Students With Conservative Christian Values

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A HEURISTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY OF COUNSELING GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIAN VALUES

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to two women who had a profound impact on my spiritual growth: Mrs. Peggy S. Baker and Rev. Kathryn G. Brown. Ma Baker and Rev. Mother, I love and miss you. Thank you for showing me what it really means to love God and love people.

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Abstract

The purpose of this heuristic phenomenological inquiry was to better understand how counseling students with conservative Christian values interpret their own spiritual/religious identity and how this impacts the way that they experience secular counseling training programs. Utilizing a social constructivist framework, the researcher recruited 10 participants for the study. Data was collected using a demographic questionnaire, a modified version of the Multidimensional Religious Ideology Scale (MRIS), and semi-structured interviews. To analyze the data, the researcher employed the procedure created by Moustakas (1990) for heuristic inquiry, which resulted in the identification of 10 themes. Findings, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Human beings are shaped by beliefs, experiences, intersecting identities, and values. These and other attributes inform who we are and how we interact with the world around us. Values are considered convictions or beliefs that can influence our thoughts and actions. Bergin (1985) described values as beliefs about what is good and how we should achieve that good. Accordingly, individuals bring personal values into social interactions, highlighting the importance of values in interpersonal processes.

One such interpersonal process where values are inherent is the counseling relationship. Counseling is considered a professional relationship, and its interpersonal nature invites the personal, professional, and cultural values of the counselor into the counseling process (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014). Counselors are not expected to be value-neutral, but avoiding the imposition of personal values onto clients is a requirement of ethical practice (ACA Code of Ethics, A.4.b, 2014; Kocet & Herlihy, 2014). When the personal values of a counselor conflict with the collective values of the counseling profession, values-based conflicts occur (Francis & Dugger, 2014).

Values-based conflicts can occur around a variety of issues and cultural factors (e.g., suicide, abortion, gender identity, sexual orientation). Researchers have suggested, however, that value conflicts involving religion are some of the most challenging to reconcile (Bayne et al., 2020). In congruence with ACA Ethical Code A.4.b (ACA, 2014), counseling students are routinely advised that imposing values on clients is unethical, but they are less commonly trained about how to avoid doing this. This likely adds complexity to the students' experience when they hold strong values that, at the surface, seem incongruent with the values of the counseling profession.

Religious values are the convictions or beliefs associated with our religious worldview (Saleem, 2019). Religious value conflicts can occur when religious tenets conflict with multicultural tenets (e.g., gender identity, sexual expression), yet counselors are still expected to respect and serve culturally diverse clients, even those with different views around spirituality and religion (Smith et al., 2019). Spirituality and religion are a natural part of human experience; however, their ambiguous nature can be difficult to grasp conceptually, and the lack of firm and clear definitions can impact a counselor's ability to address issues of religion and/or spirituality with clients (Bohecker et al., 2017). Spirituality and religion are closely related, yet they have distinct meanings with spirituality generally being more applicable across cultures and supportive of inclusivity (Schulte et al., 2002).

The professional identity of counselors involves the integration of both personal and professional values, actions, beliefs, and worldview (Dollarhide et al., 2023). This professional identity evolves over the course of a counselor's career beginning with their master's-level training (Woo et al., 2017). Professional identity development includes both interpersonal and intrapersonal processes (Gibson et al., 2010) that help trainees move from "greater externality to greater internality" (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 50). Researchers suggest that factors like coursework, clinical experience, faculty support and guidance, and interactions with peers and other professionals influence professional identity development and move counselors-in-training towards the synthesis of their personal and professional selves (Gibson et al., 2010; Prosek & Hurt, 2014; Woo et al., 2017).

It is essential that we acknowledge the influence of cultural factors, including spirituality and religion, on the merging of personal and professional identities as spirituality and religion can have a significant impact on identity development (Nelson, 2009). Several models of identity

development exist, yet many of them gloss over the dimension of spirituality. This is unfortunate as the seminal work of William James, who studied the psychology of religion, provided the foundation for subsequent models of identity development (Poll & Smith, 2003). Fowler's stages of faith, which were built on the scholarship of Piaget and Kohlberg, are commonly used to explore spiritual/religious identity development (Nelson, 2009). Fowler posited that faith is a universal human feature (Nelson, 2009) which suggests that every human being possesses a spiritual identity even if that identity is non-religious, agnostic, or atheistic.

Counselors-in-training are not exempt from the complex relationship between spirituality/religion and identity development, and, like other developmental processes, it is necessary to consider where students may fall on the spiritual/religious identity continuum. In their work on personal religious orientation, Allport and Ross (1967) suggested that this spiritual/religious continuum spans those with an intrinsic orientation to those with an extrinsic orientation. Individuals with a more intrinsic orientation internalize their religious beliefs and integrate those beliefs into their daily lives (Allport & Ross, 1967).

Conversely, those with a more extrinsic orientation find their religious beliefs to be useful but do not consider those beliefs to be a primary motivation (Allport & Ross, 1967). Students who possess a more extrinsic religious orientation are more likely to conceal or adjust their religious beliefs to avoid social friction and, as such, may find their training programs to be more appreciative of differences while students with an intrinsic orientation might have a more isolating experience (Giordano et al., 2018).

The personal perspectives of counselors about religion and spirituality can influence how they practice (Schulte et al., 2002) and aspects like institutional religious affiliation, counselor training and multicultural competence can affect counseling graduate students' development (Lu

et al., 2020). Psychological safety and appreciation of differences are two components of a supportive learning environment and some religious counseling graduate students have reported minimizing or concealing their religious beliefs because they felt that they would not be accepted or that their beliefs would not be appreciated (Giordano et al., 2018). Counseling students of varying religious backgrounds describe feeling supported and accepted by faculty and peers at CACREP-accredited counseling programs housed in Christian institutions (Spies, 2020). This conflicts with the reports of religious counseling graduate students who were enrolled in secular training programs (Abbey & Gubi, 2022; Giordano et al., 2018; Hunt, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

The United States (U.S.) has become more racially and ethnically diverse over the past decade (Jensen et al., 2021), but our cultural mosaic has been marred by an increase in social and political polarization (Wang, 2021). That divide is not limited to race/ethnicity, class, or political affiliation but also includes the cultural aspects of spirituality and religion (Wang, 2021). Religion and spirituality are important parts of the human experience and encompass a wide range of spiritual practices and faith traditions. Humanitarianism is considered a common value across religions and increased religiosity often is correlated with political conservatism in major religious groups including Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims (Hall et al., 2010).

Approximately three out of every four Americans identify with a religious faith and of that population, and 69% ascribe to a Christian religion (Jones, 2021). This increases the likelihood that counselors will either work with clients who hold Christian values or that the counselors themselves will carry these values. Accordingly, counselors should be prepared to address issues related to spiritual and religious identity. Valid concerns have been raised,

however, about competence in the spiritual/religious domain especially when accounting for other cultural identities (Smith et al., 2019).

Spirituality and religion are covered under the umbrella of multiculturalism, which encompasses a wide range of cultural identities, but are often glossed over during training with limited opportunities for counseling students to explore their own spiritual/religious identity or how it intersects with other cultural factors (Magaldi-Dopman, 2014). In addition to lack of training around integration of spirituality/religion, the lack of guidance around navigating religious value conflicts also has been documented in the literature (Abbey & Gubi, 2022).

The American sociopolitical climate has experienced a distinct shift where society has become more secularized, and politics has become more religious; Republicans are more representative of Christian conservatism and Democrats are labeled as liberal and ecumenical (Hollinger, 2022). In higher education, many university faculty report Democratic affiliation, particularly in the humanities and social sciences (Wright et al., 2019), which explains why academia has been described as having an anti-Christian bias and leaning towards political liberalism (Yancey, 2011). Counselor education is not exempt from this trend, which increases the likelihood that counseling graduate students with conservative Christian values will encounter counseling faculty with more liberal beliefs. Support from an *experienced guide* and supervision have been identified as catalysts for growth (Moss et al., 2014), so students who are hesitant to share freely with faculty because of differing beliefs may be hindered developmentally.

Counselors should graduate from their training programs with the tools necessary to navigate a variety of cultural matters but there appear to be gaps in training that leave them unprepared for the complex cultural concerns that often accompany spirituality and religion

(Henriksen et al., 2015). Not only do counselors-in-training feel inadequately prepared to address these issues with clients, they also have not had opportunities to explore these matters for themselves (Magaldi-Dopman, 2014). Failing to properly tend to the growth and development of counselors around cultural competence in spirituality and religion, which includes counselor self-awareness, can result in clinicians who are culturally insensitive which may lead to client harm (Sue & Sue, 2019).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand how counseling students with conservative Christian values interpret their own spiritual/religious identity and how this impacts the way that they experience secular counseling training programs within a social constructivist lens (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, what is their understanding of their own spiritual/religious identity and how their religious values have influenced their training experience and impacted their sense of psychological safety in their training programs. This study aimed to elucidate the lived experiences of these counseling graduate students.

The extant literature focuses on religious students from various world religions while this study specifically highlights the experiences of Christian students with a more conservative orientation. Examining the experiences of counseling graduate students with conservative Christian values can open the door for continued conversation about the gaps in counselor education around spirituality/religion in the areas of pedagogy and supervision. The integration of spirituality, intellect, and emotions in the learning space can generate growth opportunities for students (Wallace, 2017) and supervision is the place where issues around spirituality and religion most often are addressed (Hull et al., 2016; Whitman & Bidell, 2014).

Need for the Study

This study identifies the ways that counseling students are thinking about spirituality/religion and how they navigate a secular counseling program so that curriculum, training, mentoring, and supervision can be tailored to their needs. Additionally, this study offers data on the experiences of Christian counseling students in secular training programs which are often considered to be progressive or liberal leaning which could, in turn, impact the experiences and training of counseling students who identify as conservative. Students who hold more conservative views may be reluctant to show up authentically (Hunt, 2019) which could prevent them from receiving the supervision and training that they need.

In this study, I explored the intersection of personal and professional identity which has both educational and clinical implications. Exposure to diverse ideas and viewpoints in the context of inclusive learning spaces is a crucial part of the learning process (Giordano et al., 2018) and this research provides a meaningful contribution to the existing body of literature by elevating the experiences of counseling graduate students with conservative Christian values.

Interpretive Framework

The interpretive framework can provide guidance for building a study while defining and supporting the philosophical, epistemological, analytical, and methodological approach adopted by the researcher (Grant & Osanloo, 2016). Social constructivism as a theoretical framework considers that knowledge is developed in the context of community and not as isolated individuals which means that what we believe together with our community can become our truth (Cottone, 2007). Counselor training and development begins in the confines of a learning community like the way that spiritual/religious identity development can occur within a faith community. As such, it is important to consider how social influences shape participant

understanding. Social constructivism provided a supportive framework for understanding what the participants were experiencing and identifying implications for counselor education. This framework will be detailed more thoroughly in Chapters Two and Three.

Research Design and Methodology

I conducted a heuristic phenomenological inquiry of the training experiences of counseling graduate students with conservative Christian values. At the start of my counselor training program, I held Christian beliefs that could best be described as conservative. Heuristic inquiry allows for a subjective exploration of the phenomenon being studied (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985) which makes it a fitting approach when the researcher has personal experience with the phenomenon.

Through a social constructivist lens, I explored how these students view their spiritual/religious identity and how their conservative Christian values influenced their experience in their training programs. I utilized a purposeful sampling strategy to recruit participants who met the established criteria (i.e., criterion sampling; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once the data was collected, I analyzed the data using the process outlined by Douglass and Moustakas (1985) for heuristic inquiry: (a) immersion, (b) acquisition, and (c) realization. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981) were evaluated throughout the study to establish trustworthiness.

Research Questions

The primary research questions that were addressed through this study are:

1. *What are the lived experiences of counseling students with conservative Christian values in secular counselor training programs?*

2. *How do counseling students with conservative Christian values make sense of their spiritual/religious identity?*

As previously mentioned, investigating the experiences of the participants around these specific research questions provided insight into the way counseling graduate students with conservative Christian values think about their spiritual/religious identity and how they experience secular training programs which are often considered to be progressive.

Definition of Terms

Spirituality. A way of being, available to all people, that encompasses diverse experiences and expression, considers higher purposes beyond self, explores beliefs about life after death and the future, and actively embraces compassion (Cashwell & Bartley, 2014).

Religion. "An integrated system of beliefs, lifestyle, ritual activities, and social institutions by which individuals give meaning to (or find meaning in) their lives by orienting themselves to what they experience as holy, sacred, or of the highest value" (Corbett-Hemeyer, 2016, p.16). Religion is distinct from spirituality in that it is a social construct created by humans, for the expression and/or experience of spirituality (Cashwell & Bartley, 2014).

Spiritual/religious identity. The developmental process by which individuals explore and embrace a set of spiritual or religious beliefs and/or practices (Balkin et al., 2009).

Religious values. Convictions or beliefs associated with our religious worldview that can influence our thoughts and behavior (Saleem, 2019).

Christian. The term used to identify those considered to be followers of Jesus Christ which, according to Acts 11:26, was first used to describe the disciples of Jesus in the Greek city of

Antioch (Cross & Livingstone, 2009). It has since expanded to include all those who ascribe to the tenets of Christianity in belief and/or practice.

Conservative Christian Values. Values that align with orthodox, traditional, or conventional Christian beliefs and principles as it relates to biblical authority, moral responsibility, and Christian conduct.

Counseling Graduate Student. This term can be used to describe both master's and doctoral-level students however, for the purpose of this study, 'counseling graduate student' refers to a master's level student enrolled in a secular counseling training program that is accredited by CACREP.

Conclusion

When exploring the experiences of counseling graduate students with conservative Christian values, we must consider the complex nature of identity and the ways that spiritual/religious identity and professional identity can intersect, both intrapersonally and interpersonally (Killian & Floren, 2020). Examining the experiences of counseling graduate students with conservative Christian values can open the door for continued conversation about the gaps in counselor education around spirituality/religion from both a clinical and counselor identity perspective. This study highlighted the ways that counseling students with more conservative views are experiencing their training programs so that counselor educators can tailor curriculum to meet their needs and foster environments that promote psychological safety and the appreciation of cultural differences.

This chapter provided background and context for the current study, highlighting both its purpose and significance. Chapter Two includes a review of existing literature to support the need for the current study. Chapter Three outlines the methodology for the current study. Finally,

Chapters Four and Five describe the study results and the interpretation of those findings, respectively.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As diverse as the American cultural landscape may be, challenges still exist with accepting and celebrating identities that are different from our own. Though labeled as a more progressive profession that values autonomy and self-determination (Francis & Dugger, 2014), the field of counseling is not exempt from these difficulties, and clinicians must navigate these challenges internally but also externally with the clients that they serve. The proposed study examines the experiences of counseling graduate students who identify as having conservative Christian values to understand how these students think about their own religious identity as well as the religious identities of their clients; how they will work with various religious, spiritual, and moral issues; their lived experience as a counselor trainee; and how training programs are preparing students to navigate colleagues and clients who hold different spiritual/religious views.

An examination of the existing body of literature related to spirituality and religion in counseling and counselor education further supported the critical need for this study. The literature review begins with a broad overview of spirituality and religion and an exploration of spiritual/religious identity development, followed by the role of spirituality/religion and spiritual/religious values in the counseling process. To provide context around the experiences of this population of counseling graduate students, we will then turn our attention to spirituality/religion in counselor education and the characteristics of Christianity and conclude the literature review by identifying the gaps in the literature.

Spirituality and Religion

Spirituality and religion represent distinct concepts that have some overlap but often are conflated, contrasted, or used interchangeably (Giordano et al., 2018; Jones, 2019; Piedmont et al., 2009); this can be partially attributed to the various definitions crafted over many years by

theologians, psychologists, and other scholars (Griffith, 2010). This ambiguity is further complicated by the polarization that spirituality and religion has caused among sociologists and mental health professionals (Pargament, 2007). Piedmont et al. (2009) found that the terms spirituality, religiosity, or religion appeared more than 37,000 times in the PsychINFO database, suggesting that spirituality and religion are vital constructs in psychological research. While definitions may differ, most theorists concur that spirituality is a profoundly personal and complex concept, making quantifiable assessment challenging but not insurmountable (Gill & Freund, 2018).

Despite a multiplicity of definitions, spirituality and religion constitute a fundamental aspect of humanity (Nelson, 2009; Pargament, 2007), meaning that every individual possesses a spiritual essence, irrespective of whether they align with a mainstream religion, remain agnostic, or adopt atheism. Individuals may choose to dismiss or diminish the spiritual element of their identity, but they cannot deny its existence any more than they can refute the physical, psychological, or social parts of their being (Jones, 2019).

The word spirituality can be traced to the Latin word *spiritus* meaning breath and religion to the word *religare* which can mean to tie back or bind again (Jones, 2019; Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Both spirituality and religion are concerned with the process of meaning-making and connection, but spirituality focuses on the individual and religion involves a group (Griffith, 2010; Jones, 2019). Although it can be difficult to separate internal experiences from external social and cultural experiences, spirituality tends to emphasize individual, inward experiences, while religion often is associated with collective, institutionalized practices and beliefs (Jones, 2019). Religion tends to have a tribal aspect that can shape identity and promote belonging, whereas spirituality is specific to the person experiencing it (Jones, 2019). Spirituality may occur

in association with religion or independently of it (Jones, 2019) and though spirituality and religion are highly correlated, they are not interchangeable constructs (Piedmont et al., 2009).

Pargament (2007) asserted that "spirituality is an extraordinary part of the ordinary lives of people" (p. 3), describing spirituality as a "search for the sacred" (p. 53), with a discovery process involving both internal and external factors. Jones (2019) offered a simplified, client-friendly definition of spirituality: "spirituality is all the ways you and God relate to each other" (p. 29); keeping in mind that God can be exchanged for any word that resonates (e.g., the Divine, Higher Power, Jesus, Allah, Buddha, Nature, Universe). God language is present in many individuals' description of their spirituality with 89% of adults in America believing in God or a universal spirit (Jones, 2019; Pew Research Center, n.d.).

Spirituality is something that people can experience cognitively, emotionally, somatically and socially, impacting how we think, feel, behave, and engage with others (Jones, 2019; Pargament, 2007). Encompassing the various ways in which humans connect with the sacred or transcendent aspects of life, spirituality is shaped by cultural diversity and involves multiple dimensions and experiences that link our beliefs, values, emotions, behaviors, and social interactions (Jones, 2019; Pargament, 2007). The sacred dimension extends beyond our individual selves and can be experienced through encounters with the divine, others, nature, art, and more, irrespective of theistic or non-theistic orientations (Jones, 2019; Pargament, 2007).

The relational quality of spirituality makes every connection unique and spiritual relationships, similar to other types of relationships, can have both healthy and unhealthy aspects (Gill & Freund, 2018; Jones, 2019). The interaction between ourselves and the sacred is reciprocal, with us relating to God and God also relating to us (Jones, 2019). Feeling disconnected from God still has a relational nature (Jones, 2019); likewise, the spiritual

dimension can be identified in its perceived absence, through feelings like loneliness, loss, and abandonment (Pargament, 2007).

It is impossible to separate spirituality from psychotherapy which is part of the rationale for spiritually-integrated psychotherapy (Pargament, 2007). The term psychospiritual is used to express the intersection between the psychological and the spiritual, where spirituality is implicitly embedded in the experience but not explicitly identified (Jones, 2019). This can be observed in experiences like feelings of acceptance, despair, greed, joy, longing, and wonder (Jones, 2019). Spiritually-integrated psychotherapy captures the psychospiritual in that it is inherently both spiritual and psychological (Jones, 2019; Pargament, 2007).

Religion is frequently seen as a product of spirituality, representing the outward manifestation of internal spirituality, often through institutionalized beliefs and practices (Gill & Freund, 2018). Holding neither inherent goodness nor evil, religion still carries significant influence, demonstrating a duality that makes it capable of both causing and curing suffering (Griffith, 2010). Religion can shape how clients perceive, think about, and address their clinical concerns, influencing the attitudes and behaviors that affect overall health, including if a person seeks treatment and when, how open they are with the clinician, and if they follow the recommended treatment (Griffith, 2010). Allport and Ross (1967) posited that religion exists on a spectrum where extrinsically oriented individuals utilize religion for personal gains, while intrinsically oriented ones embody their religious beliefs as their core motivation.

The religiosity spectrum not only applies to religious orientation but also to religious values. Typically, conservative religious individuals embrace the concept of ultimate truth as objective, believe that the divine exists independent of humanity, prioritize preserving a unified social structure, possess a uniform worldview, embrace traditional values, and hold the

conviction that moral standards are universal, absolute, and beyond cultural relativism (Wildman et al., 2021). On the contrary, religious liberalism is generally defined by a preference for metaphorical or context-dependent interpretations of spiritual or religious ideas, an emphasis on cultural and worldview diversity, and the belief that many moral judgments are subjective rather than universally objective (Wildman et al., 2021).

Spirituality and religion are important cultural factors, affecting our lives in profound ways, both consciously and subconsciously (Gill & Freund, 2018). Spirituality and religion play a significant role in shaping our worldview and most theories consider this to be a developmental process that evolves as we move through life (Gill & Freund, 2018). When examining the experiences of counseling graduate students with conservative Christian values, it is necessary to consider their spiritual/religious journey from a developmental perspective; to that end, we will now turn our attention to spiritual/religious identity development.

Spiritual/Religious Identity Development

It is critical to recognize the pivotal role of cultural elements like spirituality and religion, given their profound effect on identity formation (Nelson, 2009) and the way that personal and professional identities intertwine. While there are numerous models of identity development, many tend to overlook the spiritual dimension, despite its importance as highlighted in the pioneering work of William James on identity theory (Poll & Smith, 2003). Although religious identity holds significant importance, scant research has been published on the topic (Halevy & Gross, 2023). In existing literature, spiritual/religious identity development is typically incorporated within psychological theories with few models devoted specifically to religious identity development. For this study, I will broadly describe the role of religion in prominent psychological theories and outline several scholarly religious identity models.

Psychological Theories and Religious Identity Development

Psychological theories can offer valuable insight into the cognitive, emotional, and social processes that contribute to the formation of religious identity. From psychodynamic theories espoused by pioneers like Freud and Jung to systems theorists like Bowen to cognitive-structural models proposed by psychologists like Piaget, various theories shed light on how religion impacts individuals' religious beliefs, values, and practices throughout their lives. By examining the intersection of psychology and religion, we can increase our comprehension of how personal experiences, social influences, and cultural contexts shape the construction and evolution of religious identity.

Psychodynamic Theories

Within the psychology field, psychodynamic theories have played a leading role in engaging with religion, offering explicit perspectives on the impact of spirituality and religion on the human psyche (Nelson, 2009). Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, relegated religion to a fervent belief in a paternal figure and intricate rituals that are akin to neurotic obsessions created as a defense against undesirable impulses (Wulff, 1996). Freud asserted that religious beliefs stem from childhood experiences and a desire for a protective father figure, making religion an illusion that is a product of wish fulfillment rather than rational observation (Nelson, 2009; Wulff, 1996).

Freud viewed religion as a hindrance to individual intellectual growth that fails to bring happiness and advocated for relinquishing religion for science to spur societal progress and advance beyond the infancy stage (Nelson, 2009; Wulff, 1996). Famed psychoanalyst Carl Jung embraced a different approach; having been influenced by the work of William James, Jung considered religion to be a fundamental aspect of the human psyche (Wulff, 1996). Jung believed

that religious experiences are genuinely felt but do not provide insight into the external world, instead offering insights into our own inner workings (Nelson, 2009).

Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson emphasized a strong connection between spirituality and the development of identity; he posited that psychosocial immaturity in personality, ethics, and spirituality are linked with characteristics like absolutism, exclusivity, rigidity, dependency, and fanaticism (Leak, 2009). Though Erikson, like Freud, believed that religion is rooted in human infantility, it does not imply immaturity; rather, it addresses fundamental human needs, fears, and desires, fosters universal trust, and provides societal frameworks for acquiring wisdom (Wulff, 1996). According to Erikson, religion and spirituality are enduring aspects of human experience, becoming permanent in midlife and later playing a crucial role in old age as individuals confront existential questions (Nelson, 2009). The various stages of Erikson's framework have implications for religious development and provide the foundation for religious identity development models like Fowler's Stages of Faith and Veerasamy's Experiential/Rational Model (Henry & Li, 2022; Nelson, 2009), both of which are outlined in the 'Religious Identity Development Models' section later in this chapter.

Systems Theories

Systemic therapy models, also known as family therapy theories, are foundational frameworks used by family therapists for clinical practice; clients from various faith traditions have acknowledged the alignment between systems theories, like Bowen's Family Systems Theory and Structural Family Therapy, and their religious beliefs, recognizing the interconnectedness of individual identity with broader systems like family, community, and society (Eppler et al., 2020). Differentiation – the capacity to think and act autonomously while remaining interconnected with others – is a core tenet of Bowen's family systems theory;

spirituality can have a profound influence on an individual's level of differentiation, leading to positive changes in both intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics (Jankowski & Vaughn, 2009). When individuals can establish a connection with God while maintaining a clear sense of self, they may foster a deeper, more intimate "person-to-God" relationship (Poll & Smith, 2003).

Cognitive-Structural Theories

The cognitive-structural theories that are most used to understand religion are the developmental theories pioneered by researchers Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Carol Gilligan (Nelson, 2009). These theories aim to uncover organized mental structures or schemas within individuals and see religious or spiritual development as a form of learning or transformational change (Nelson, 2009). In cognitive-structural theories, an individual's cognitive identity evolves through sequential stages: initially lacking the capacity for self-reflection and objective self-perception, then progressively acquiring these abilities, and ultimately integrating an objective understanding of both self and others with development being driven by conflicts arising from schemas that clash with the environment (Poll & Smith, 2003). Piaget believed that religious identity is initially shaped by practices rather than beliefs, with young children capable of internalizing teachings about practices from Biblical stories (Nelson, 2009). From Kohlberg's perspective, religious development shares similarities with moral development but diverges in that morality revolves around the concept of the good life and person, whereas religion delves into fundamental inquiries about human nature and the human condition (Nelson, 2009).

Religious Identity Development Models

Beyond the integration of religion into existing therapy theories, scholars also have developed models of religious identity development. Religious identity development models

serve as invaluable tools in discerning the journey that people undertake in forging their religious identity. Unlike psychological theories, these models provide clear and structured frameworks that describe the formation of religious identity. Ranging from models with a more theological focus, like James Fowler's Stages of Faith Development, to more integrative models like Loder's Logic of the Spirit, these approaches can clarify the intricate process of religious identity construction. Below are descriptions of four prominent religious development models.

Loder's Logic of the Spirit

Through his literary work, *The Logic of the Spirit*, theologian James Loder posits that both theological and psychological viewpoints are essential for comprehending human development, believing that development is influenced by spiritual transformation (Nelson, 2009). This contrasts with psychological theories such as Fowler's, which suggest that spiritual transformation is inherent in human development and prioritize psychological considerations over theological or spiritual aspects (Nelson, 2009). Using his personal experiences and those of others he met, Loder identified a transformational pattern (i.e., logic) that allows individuals to replace old frames of reference with new or previously hidden meanings (Koonz, 2011).

There are five steps in the pattern: (1) conflict, (2) interlude for scanning, (3) insight or constructive act of the imagination, (4) release and openness, and (5) interpretation. According to Koonz (2011), the process begins when a situation or event prompts a search for resolution within a specific context (conflict), leading to the dedication of care and time to examining the problem and potential solutions (interlude for scanning) and followed by reconfiguring the elements of the conflict. The fourth step involves a release of energy from the conflict, which opens the individual to a greater awareness of new contextual elements (Koonz, 2011).

Interpretation follows, inviting a search for connections between the imaginative construct and the original conflict while testing its truth and fit with reality (Koonz, 2011).

Fowler's Stages of Faith Development

James Fowler's stages of faith development is perhaps the most influential modern framework concerning religious and spiritual identity development (Leak, 2009; Nelson, 2009). In his book, *Stages of Faith*, Fowler (1995) suggested that faith serves as a universal aspect of human existence, providing coherence and purpose to life, connecting individuals to one another and to broader contexts, and empowering them to navigate the inherent limitations of humanity (Nelson, 2009). Inspired by the insights of Piaget and Kohlberg, Fowler crafted a structural model of faith development based on the premise that identity takes shape through initial interactions with others followed by the process of individuation from them and that individuals need to establish a stable self-concept before they can move beyond self-focus and establish a connection with the divine (Nelson, 2009; Poll & Smith, 2003).

In his perspective, faith evolution mirrors cognitive growth, encompassing transitions across stages, each characterized by distinct operational patterns around knowing and valuing (Nelson, 2009). Fowler's model has seven stages of faith that tend to occur during specific developmental periods: (0) Undifferentiated/primal occurring during infancy), (1) Intuitive-projective in the early childhood/preschool period, (2) Mythic-literal when children are school aged, (3) Synthetic-conventional during adolescence, (4) Individuative-reflective throughout young adulthood, (5) Conjunctive for mid-adulthood and later, and finally (6) Universalizing (Fowler, 1985). Fowler viewed these stages as universal, sequential, and hierarchal with each stage becoming more intricate as we develop (Nelson, 2009).

In Fowler's model, the undifferentiated/primal stage is marked by attachment to the primary caregiver; this represents an infant's first experience with a power higher than themselves that is a source of provision and wisdom (Veerasamy, 2002). The intuitive-projective stage coincides with the preoperational stage of Piaget's cognitive stages of development; during this stage of the model, individuals become aware of God and other issues of faith, though God is conceptualized in an imaginative or magical manner (Fowler, 1985; Rutledge, 1989). Between the ages of seven and twelve, individuals enter the mythic-literal stage and begin to develop their faith based on narratives shared within their faith community; there is less dependence on imagination and more concrete thinking (Fowler 1985; Rutledge, 1989, Veerasamy, 2002).

The synthetic-conventional stage, occurring during adolescence, aligns with Piaget's formal operations stage and is characterized by integrating the information we have absorbed into a system (Fowler, 1985). We begin to develop a personal faith during this stage but are still influenced by the thoughts and opinions of those close to us (Parker, 2009). When we reach young adulthood, we move into the individuative-reflective stage and our executive ego emerges; we are then able to move away from previously established values that were based on the experiences of others and take responsibility for our own beliefs (Fowler, 1985; Leak, 2009; Parker, 2009). The conjunctive stage occurs during mid-adulthood and is marked by an openness to other faith perspectives, thinking that is less dichotomous, and an increased tolerance for ambiguity (Fowler, 1985; Leak, 2009; Rutledge, 1989). Universalizing, the final stage in Fowler's model, involves increased caring and compassion and a detachment from temporal things; it is extremely rare for individuals to reach this stage (Fowler, 1985; Rutledge, 1989; Veerasamy, 2002).

Poll and Smith's Spiritual Identity Development Model

By merging insights from psychological theories with theistic assumptions expressed by other scholars, Poll and Smith (2003) constructed a framework for spiritual identity where people cultivate a spiritual sense of self through spiritual experiences that encompass interaction with God and recognition of the divine within themselves and others. This model conceptualizes spiritual identity development in four stages: (1) Pre-awareness, (2) Awakening, (3) Recognition, and (4) Integration. The initial phase in the formation of the spiritual self involves *pre-awareness* of one's eternal essence in connection to God; during this stage, individuals are not consciously aware of themselves in spiritual contexts (Poll & Smith, 2003). The second stage typically encompasses a phase of learning, crisis, or conflict that triggers an *awakening* of self-awareness in relation to God.

In the third stage, *recognition*, individuals identify and recall previous spiritual experiences, expanding their initial awareness to encompass a broader range of spiritual encounters in various contexts; this leads to the development of a consistent spiritual identity and the emergence of spiritual themes in their lives (Poll & Smith, 2003). In the fourth and final stage, *integration*, individuals fuse their spiritual experiences with their self-concept, internalizing these experiences while cultivating spiritual relationships, both with others and the divine; at this stage, individuals acknowledge their inherent spiritual nature, which shapes their perception and interaction with the world (Poll & Smith, 2003).

Experiential/Rational Model of Religious Identity Development

The seven-status Experiential/Rational Model of Religious Identity Development, created by Veerasamy (2002), was meant to expand upon Fowler's six stages, which primarily addressed the cognitive aspect of religion and is built on the premise that individuals engage with

information through both experiential and rational systems, and religious identity development emerges from the interplay of these systems (Henry & Li, 2022). Drawing from Kohlberg's and Erikson's developmental models, Helms' model of racial identity development, and Epstein's theory of personality, which emphasizes the interaction between rational and experiential systems in information processing, this model defined statuses as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes guiding how individuals perceive interpersonal information (Henry & Li, 2022; Veerasamy, 2002). These statuses unfold sequentially in development, with transitions to the next status occurring when individuals struggle to effectively cope with their current religious experiences (Henry & Li, 2022).

The *concrete status* involves the exclusive processing of religious matters through the experiential system, resulting in a dualistic view of religion, where one religion is perceived as right while others are considered wrong; during this status, views are heavily influenced by authority figures and significant connections, casting individuals at this stage as *unconscious conformists* (Veerasamy, 2002). Individuals in the *rational status* still rely heavily on the experiential system and become *conscious conformists* who define their religious identity based on interpersonal relationships (Veerasamy, 2002). As individuals start experiencing conflict around their religious views, they are thrust into the *confusion status* and experience anxiety around religious issues; some may question their understanding of religion and seek evidence or support for their beliefs through the rational system (Veerasamy, 2002). According to Veersamy (2002), individuals in this status either progress to the next stage of development or regress to their previous state.

Once individuals move to the *cognitive-rationalization status,* they exclusively analyze religious information through the rational system, devoid of experiential engagement, taking a

highly intellectualized perspective on religion; individuals become more rigid in their beliefs, aiming to shield themselves from the anxiety experienced in the *confusion status* (Veerasamy, 2002). In the *exploration status*, individuals reengage their experiential system, but the rational system remains dominant; they embark on an independent journey to explore the meaning of religion, free from external influence (Veerasamy, 2002). During the *acceptance status* there is a deeper reintegration of the experiential system in processing religious information and individuals realize that a comprehensive understanding of religion requires harmonious utilization of both faith and reason (Veerasamy, 2002). Finally, individuals can arrive at the integration status where there is a complete balance between the experiential and rational systems to fully understand and embrace religion; individuals in this stage do not feel constrained by the boundaries of their religion to be considered devout but instead practice their religion in a manner where their thoughts, actions, and behaviors are in alignment (Veerasamy, 2002).

While there are many ways to conceptualize spiritual or religious identity development, it is important to consider how spiritual/religious identity affects both the counseling process and counselor training. Throughout clinical practice, counselors will encounter clients at various stages in their religious identity development and may also be sorting through their own religious identity, an exploration that may have started, for some, during their training experience. Awareness of how spiritual/religious identity is shaped becomes critical when examining the significance of spirituality and religion in counseling and its implications for clients and clinicians alike.

Spirituality/Religion in Counseling

Forty-one percent of adults in the United States report that they have become more spiritual over their lifetime with 24% saying they have become more religious (Pew Research Center, 2024), suggesting that spirituality and religion continue to be important aspects in the lives of many Americans. Commonly, researchers find that clients often face spiritual or religious challenges and desire to discuss these topics in mental health counseling (Harris et al., 2016; Knox et al., 2005). In their study on client perspectives about religion and spirituality in psychotherapy, Knox et al. (2005) found that many participants engaged in religious or spiritual activities, recognizing the significance of these practices in their lives and their understanding of the world.

For some, religion and spirituality play a pivotal role in their lives, providing a sense of purpose and preventing them from succumbing to despair, indicating that religiosity and spirituality may support psychological well-being (Knox et al., 2005). Mental health clients consider religion/spirituality to be relevant to and supportive of their mental health and do not typically associate religion/spirituality with mental illness or other struggles (Oxhandler et al., 2021). Religiosity has proven effective in preventing suicide and substance use disorders; it shows moderate effectiveness in preventing depression, and possibly trauma-related disorders and antisocial personality traits, but its effect on other conditions, like personality disorders, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and chronic psychotic disorders (e.g., schizophrenia), is less consistent and varies across studies (Koenig et al., 2020).

Given the role that spirituality and religion play in shaping client identity, clinicians should be prepared to address spiritual/religious issues in the counseling process. Spirituality covers the full spectrum of human experience and counselors who are properly attuned to the

spiritual dimension of clients must be able to identify the range of experiences that might have spiritual significance (Jones, 2019). Oxhandler (2017) encapsulated spirituality and religion within the term *sacred* which "refers to a person, object, principle, or concept that transcends individual identity" (p. 6). Irrespective of their own religious or spiritual affiliation, counselors should be able to acknowledge the sacred within themselves which may enable them to perceive the sacred within others (Oxhandler, 2017).

Throughout the therapeutic process, clients may implicitly reference spirituality and religion, perhaps by raising existential concerns or questions about meaning rather than directly linking their religious or spiritual life with their presenting issues, or citing them as a primary reason for seeking therapy; clients may also explicitly address religious/spiritual topics (e.g., anger at God or a Higher Power), with the desire to work through these issues in counseling (Knox et al., 2005). Considering that religion and spirituality feature prominently in the ethical guidelines of various helping professions, with a focus on non-discrimination and the integration of the client's religious and spiritual perspectives, recognizing the client's spiritual/religious identity becomes particularly significant (Oxhandler, 2017).

Client Preferences

Clients describe positive experiences discussing religion in counseling when counselors were open to it and allowed clients control over the discussion (Harris et al., 2016). Dimmick et al. (2022) discovered that both religious or spiritual clients and non-religious or spiritual clients have a desire for spiritual or religious issues to be addressed in therapy with non-religious or spiritual clients preferring to work with therapists who share their non-religious or spiritual perspective, even more strongly than religious or spiritual clients prefer religious or spiritual therapists. Some clients even prefer their therapists to incorporate religious or spiritual

interventions into therapy sessions, a practice that can be effective regardless of whether the therapist shares the client's beliefs (Post & Wade, 2009).

Many clients, though not all, express a desire to discuss religious or spiritual matters in therapy; however, therapists should regularly gauge clients' preferences regarding these discussions (Post & Wade, 2009). Clients expect counselors to respect their beliefs but also fear these beliefs might be overlooked (Harris et al., 2016). Helpful dialogues are typically initiated by the client, relevant to their concerns, are facilitated by counselor openness, and lead to positive therapeutic outcomes with unhelpful discussions making clients feel judged and resulting in negative outcomes (Harris et al., 2016).

In a study on the experiences of Christian clients in secular psychotherapy spaces, the participants noted that constructive dialogues about faith were initiated by both clients and therapists but that clients expressed apprehension about broaching the subject of religion/spirituality with secular therapists, fearing potential judgment or misunderstanding (Cragun & Friedlander, 2012), suggesting that therapist broaching may be important. Christian clients need to understand that expressing spiritual concerns is not necessarily viewed as pathological by secular counselors (Worthington & Scott, 1983). Some clients intentionally select secular therapists for a less biased perspective and greater control over integrating faith into treatment, prioritizing their treatment expectations over their religious affiliation (Cragun & Friedlander, 2012).

It is important to note that rates of affiliation with organized religions tend to be higher among historically marginalized individuals, such as Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), who face systemic racism and disparities in accessing psychological services (Currier et al., 2023). To foster a safe environment for discussing religious identity and beliefs, intake

procedures should include specific inquiries about faith which not only provides insight into the client's beliefs but also signals that discussing faith is permissible and relevant (Cragun & Friedlander, 2012). While it is beneficial to let clients initiate discussions about religious or spiritual topics, clinicians should be aware of their role in the integration of spirituality/religion and convey openness to exploring these aspects of their clients' lives (Cragun & Friedlander, 2012). Clinicians may elect to introduce conversation about cultural identities through broaching (Depauw et al., 2023); despite a growing body of literature that establishes broaching as an important part of multicultural competence (Day-Vines et al., 2020), there is limited research focused specifically on broaching religion and spirituality.

Role of the Clinician

Clinicians generally lean towards spirituality over religion compared to their clients so therapists must be aware of their own religious biases to prevent imposing them on clients (Post & Wade, 2009). Some counselors express a preference for the term s*pirituality* over *religion*, viewing religion as encompassing the structure and rituals of beliefs and spirituality representing the beliefs themselves; this could be attributed to the instances where the strictness of religion has hindered their experiences with integrating religion/spirituality into clinical work (Morrison & Borgen, 2010). As professionals reflect on and embrace the sacred within themselves, including their own religious or spiritual beliefs and practices woven into their daily lives, they can better recognize this idiosyncratic sacredness within their clients which, in turn, can assist them with assessing individual client preferences rather than making assumptions based on religious or spiritual identification (Dimmick et al., 2022; Oxhandler, 2017). Additionally, mental health professionals must adopt a framework for accurately identifying and addressing maladaptive thoughts and behaviors related to religion and spirituality to help safeguard

vulnerable individuals while still respecting their expressions of faith (Magyar-Russell & Griffith, 2016).

A counselor's personal values directly shape the goals they set for counseling sessions, influencing clients by directing attention to specific problem areas or their underlying causes. While both secular and Christian counselors strive to be attuned to individual client perspectives, their value systems are likely to influence the treatment goals they suggest to clients (Worthington & Scott, 1983). Along with values, a clinician's level of religious commitment can significantly influence both the frequency and perceived proficiency they have in employing religious and spiritual interventions in counseling (Walker et al., 2005). Spiritual and Religious Competencies, like other forms of multicultural competence, involve recognizing the clinician's own religious, spiritual, or non-religious/non-spiritual perspective and how these may impact their work (Currier et al., 2023). Clinicians must acknowledge that they may hold different worldviews than their clients and refrain from subtly or overtly imposing their values during therapy sessions (Currier et al., 2023).

Unfortunately, therapists often lack formal education in religious and spiritual diversity during their graduate training, leading to a lack of confidence in working with clients in the religious/spiritual domain (Post & Wade, 2009). Client hesitation to bring up spiritual or religious issues has been linked to perceptions of the therapist's discomfort with religious matters, uncertainty about the relevance of discussing faith, and past negative experiences (Cragun & Friedlander, 2012). Many clinicians feel ill-equipped to engage in discussions about their clients' faith or beliefs, fearing they might intrude or assume the role of a religious authority (Magyar-Russell & Griffith, 2016). To navigate these concerns, counselors should actively seek

resources to enhance their understanding of spirituality and religion in clinical practice and seek consultation or supervision (Knox et al., 2005; Post & Wade, 2009).

While it is important to develop the necessary awareness, knowledge, and skills to address religious and spiritual domains, it is equally important to recognize the boundaries of professional competence and scope of practice (Currier et al., 2023). Notably, the primary training experiences contributing to therapists' competency in using these interventions were gained through clinical training rather than coursework related to religion in general or religious and spiritual interventions specifically (Walker et al., 2005). Clinicians can seek consultation from colleagues with expertise in addressing religious and spiritual issues, seek permission from the client to involve their religious leader, educate themselves about the client's faith tradition, or, as a last resort, refer the client to a specialist in religious and spiritual matters (Magyar-Russell & Griffith, 2016). Essential components of clinical training include supervision hours involving religious clients, workshops addressing religious issues in counseling and the application of religious and spiritual interventions, and practical experience utilizing these interventions within counseling settings (Walker et al., 2005).

Benefits and Challenges of Spiritual Integration

Pargament et al. (2005) suggested that an empirical rationale for spiritually-integrated psychotherapy is supported by the possibility that spirituality is part of the presenting problem or part of the solution, the desire of clients to have spiritually-sensitive treatment, and the inability to extricate spirituality from psychotherapy. As previously mentioned, clients often find discussing spiritual matters in counseling beneficial, and faith conversations were fostered by therapist openness, contrasting with unhelpful discussions that left participants feeling judged, often occurring when therapists imposed their own beliefs (Cragun & Friedlander, 2012; Harris

et al., 2016). Typically, clients find these dialogues most beneficial when initiated by the client gradually over time, rather than in the initial session, allowing trust in the therapeutic relationship to develop (Post & Wade, 2009).

Scholars posit that religious and spiritual interventions are often effective, making it wise for clinicians to consider their use when appropriate (Post & Wade, 2009). The efficacy of these interventions is more closely tied to alignment with the client's religious commitment rather than the therapist's, meaning therapists of varying religious beliefs can effectively implement them. A religious or spiritual intervention that has been beneficial for one client does not guarantee, however, the same benefits with another client (Currier et al., 2023; Post & Wade, 2009), highlighting the nuance of individual clients.

Dangers of spiritually-integrated psychotherapy include potentially trivializing the significance of spirituality, reducing spirituality to basic cognitive, physical, or social processes, imposing personal values around spirituality, and overestimating the importance of spirituality (Pargament et al., 2005). There are other barriers that hinder the ethical integration of religion and spirituality in therapy, including insufficient training, lack of consensus on competencies, and a dearth of research on the subject (Currier et al., 2023). Ethical challenges in this realm include negative bias against religion or spirituality, the imposition of values, conflicts between religious beliefs and scientific authority, and practicing beyond one's competence (Currier et al., 2023). Ethical dilemmas may also arise when a client's commitment to their faith exacerbates symptoms of mental illness, or when spiritual struggles contribute to chronic suffering or despair (Magyar-Russell & Griffith, 2016). Clinicians may need to assist clients in discerning whether these struggles foster spiritual growth or pose risks for clinical depression, anxiety disorders, or

other psychiatric or medical conditions that may jeopardize the well-being of vulnerable individuals (Magyar-Russell & Griffith, 2016).

Spirituality and religion, and the values associated with spiritual/religious worldview, are cultural factors that can impact the counseling experience. Values permeate every aspect of psychotherapy, rooted not only in therapeutic orientations but also in the personal lives of individual therapists (Pargament, 2007). Further, client values are a part of the counseling process and spiritual themes involving values can emerge in various contexts around topics like meaning, purpose, responsibility, forgiveness, and community (Dailey, 2018). Understanding the experiences of counseling graduate students who hold conservative Christian values requires that we address the function of spiritual/religious values in counseling.

Spiritual/Religious Values in Counseling

Values can be defined as guiding principles and standards of behavior that reflect what we consider most important and influence our way of being (Brown, 2018). Values inevitably surface during the counseling process and may include more universal values like honesty and freedom along with values that are relative to the specific individual (Patterson, 1989). Although counseling has historically been considered a technical procedure, devoid of values and separate from personal influence (Bergin, 1985), it has become increasingly evident over time that a value-neutral or value-free approach to counseling is unattainable and clinicians should focus instead on how values inform the therapeutic process (Bayne et al., 2020; Bergin et al., 1996; Kocet & Herlihy, 2014).

Values are embedded in every phase of counseling and can influence important aspects of treatment like theoretical approach, pathology, goals, and client outcomes (Bergin, 1985). Most professionals in the helping field acknowledge the influence of values on mental health and

emotional well-being but many remain uncertain about how to address values in session (Bergin et al., 1996). While spirituality is recognized as a fundamental aspect of human existence (Bergin, 1991), dealing with spiritual or religious values in counseling can introduce an additional level of complexity as these values may, for some, be nuanced and a core part of the individual's identity.

Spiritual/religious values can be defined as convictions or beliefs associated with one's spiritual/religious worldview that influence their thoughts and behavior (Saleem, 2019). Researchers have found that clients with strongly held religious beliefs prefer counselors who hold similar beliefs, finding it easier to trust them and client outcomes improve when counseling aligns with client values (Smith et al., 2019). In the counseling space, the personal values of the counselor can often be communicated to clients, explicitly or implicitly (Francis & Dugger, 2014), so it is important for counselors to be aware of how their values and the values of the client affect the counseling relationship. Most counselors are aware that direct communication of personal values constitutes an ethical violation. Indirect communication of values may occur, however, through how the counselor responds to what the client shares, what areas the counselor chooses to focus on or steer away from, which interventions the counselor implements, and even the treatment goals the counselor selects (Francis & Dugger, 2014; Harris et al., 2016).

Values and the ACA Code of Ethics

Given the vital role that values play in the counseling process, the American Counseling Association (ACA) provides guidance around values with the ACA Code of Ethics (2014). Section A.4.b. on 'Personal Values' in the ACA Code of Ethics (2014) provides this guidance around counselor values:

> "Counselors are aware of—and avoid imposing—their own values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Counselors respect the diversity of clients, trainees, and research participants and seek training in areas in which they are at risk of imposing their values onto clients, especially when the counselor's values are inconsistent with the client's goals or are discriminatory in nature."

Counselors are expected to respect the diversity of the people with whom they engage, specifically clients, trainees, research participants, and that diversity includes values differences (ACA, 2014). If a counselor discovers that they are at risk of imposing their personal values, they should seek out additional training in those areas, especially if the counselor's values are inconsistent with the goals of the client or might be considered prejudicial (ACA, 2014). According to section A.11.b. on 'Values Within Termination and Referral,' counselors are also prohibited from referring or terminating clients based solely on their personal values and are again encouraged to seek training in instances when their values do not align with the goals of the client or are discriminatory (ACA, 2014).

Though the ACA Code of Ethics addresses the role of values in the counseling relationship and provides some direction around values imposition, this does not eradicate the potential for value conflicts. Value or values-based conflicts occur when the personal values of a counselor are at odds with the values of a client and/or the values of the counseling profession (Grunhaus et al, 2018). The interpretation of the ACA Code of Ethics (2014) can vary significantly, and scholars provide varied guidance on how to address these issues with clients (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014). Personal values exploration, additional training, supervision, ethical bracketing, and decision-making models like the Counselor Values-Based Conflict Model have all been identified as ways to address value conflicts (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014; Whitman &

Bidell, 2014). As mentioned in Chapter One, value conflicts may be centered around an array of issues and cultural factors (e.g., race/ethnicity, politics, gender identity, sexual expression, class), and conflicts around religious value conflicts are some of the most difficult to resolve (Bayne et al., 2020) because of the way that religion can shape worldview, impacting how we think about ourselves, others, and our place in the world (Nelson, 2009). As counselors-in-training wrestle with the tension between their personal and professional identities, shifting perspectives and changes in their worldview may lead to a sense of loss, further complicating their experience with religious value conflicts (Whitman & Bidell, 2014).

Religious Value Conflicts

While value conflicts can exist in a variety of contexts, it is most frequently noted when exploring religious beliefs. Conflicts around religious values occur when religious tenets conflict with other multicultural tenets (Smith et al., 2019). This conflict can be intrapersonal or interpersonal, occurring within the client, within the counselor, or between the two people. For example, a client may seek counseling to resolve questions around their gender identity or sexual or affectional orientation, while holding a religious identity rooted in cisnormativity and heteronormativity. The same client could present without the internal values conflict, but land in the office of a counselor who holds cisnormative and heteronormative values based on *their* religious identity. If this counselor bracketed these values completely, the value conflict would be internal to the counselor. If, however, they imposed these values on the client, this would then become an example of interpersonal values conflict and be incongruent with the ACA Code of Ethics (ACA, 2014).

While there may be many potential values conflicts within and between counselor and client, such as abortion and sex outside of marriage, scholars specifically have examined this

conflict between religious/spiritual identity and gender/sexual expression and identity. For example, when thinking about counseling students with conservative Christian values, we should consider the way that spiritual/religious identities intersect with other cultural aspects like gender identity and sexual-affectional expression, which can lead to conflicts (Smith et al., 2019). Scholars suggest that a substantial proportion of religious value conflicts in counseling involve providing affirmative care for members of the LGBTQ+ community (Whitman & Bidell, 2014). If counseling programs desire to train culturally competent clinicians, they must commit to helping counselors-in-training with value conflicts and fulfill their responsibility to educate, mentor, and lead students while encouraging social advocacy and gatekeeping when necessary (Whitman & Bidell, 2014).

Religious value conflicts have serious ethical and legal implications for counseling programs as evidenced by several court cases involving the religious values of counselors-in-training. In *Keeton v. Anderson-Wiley* (2011), an Augusta State University student, Jennifer Keeton, asked the court for reinstatement after being dismissed from a graduate counseling program when she insisted that she should be able to counsel LGBTQ+ clients that their sexuality was immoral. Keeton argued that her right to free speech and religious freedom as outlined in the First Amendment supersedes the ACA Code of Ethics (Hancock, 2013). The U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that ASU, and by extension other graduate counseling programs, can require students to adhere to the ACA Code of Ethics as part of their curriculum without infringing on or restricting religious practices (*Keeton v. Anderson-Wiley*, 2011).

In a similar case, *Ward v. Wilbanks* (2009), Julea Ward, a graduate student in the counseling program at Eastern Michigan University (EMU), attempted to refer a client to another student during her practicum experience citing religious conflicts as the client was seeking

counseling around depression and issues in a seme-sex relationship (Kaplan, 2014). The EMU counseling program offered to assist Ward with navigating her religious value conflict, but she refused saying that she would not "violate her religious beliefs by affirming homosexual conduct within the context of a counseling relationship" (*Ward v. Wilbanks*, 2009). Although the initial ruling was in support of EMU, the matter was settled outside of court during the appeal process (Kaplan, 2014).

Religious value conflicts extend beyond counselor training programs and have the potential to impact clinical work. In the case of *Copas v. Haslam* (2018), a prospective client, Bleu Copas, sued the Governor of Tennessee, Bill Haslam, because of a state statute that says that counselors are not required to see clients with whom they may have value conflicts. Tennessee House Bill 1840 protects counselors with sincerely held principles from criminal prosecution or civil lawsuits if they refer clients based on those principles unless the client presents as an immediate danger to themselves or others (*Copas v. Haslam*, 2018). Copas was honorably discharged, against his will, as part of the United States Military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy and felt the bill was discriminatory and therefore unconstitutional (*Copas v. Haslam*, 2018). The case was dismissed because Copas had not actually been denied counseling and therefore had not established standing (*Copas v. Haslam*, 2018). Nonetheless, it seems clear from these cases that religious value conflicts are not only ethical issues, but also have legal ramifications.

Navigating Religious Value Conflicts

Failure to adequately address religious value conflicts can pose risks to the client, potentially causing counselor impairment and, as illustrated by the aforementioned cases, may lead to violations of the ACA Code of Ethics and subsequent legal cases. Religious and spiritual

issues are common in counseling, but ways to integrate religion and spirituality, and subsequently how to navigate religious value conflicts, are not adequately addressed during counseling graduate programs, leaving budding counselors ill-equipped to handle these conversations despite having multicultural training (Curry et al., 2015; Lu et al., 2020; Magaldi-Dopman, 2014). This may be attributed to counselor educators lacking knowledge about spirituality and religion, dismissing the role of religion and spirituality in clients' lives, or being unsure of how to train counselors around spirituality and religion; counselor educators may also avoid addressing religion and spirituality because they are not salient parts of their cultural background and thus are not considered to be relevant to counselor training (Adams et al., 2015).

Students receive limited guidance around managing religious value conflicts which could potentially leave counseling students with conservative Christian values unprepared for the value conflicts that may arise during session. Anecdotally, religiously conservative students may try to avoid situations that create conflict between their personal beliefs and professional standards (Bidell, 2014); this corresponds with empirical evidence that religious students are reluctant to share their faith for fear of judgment or rejection (Hunt, 2019). As the significance of spiritual/religious values in counseling becomes more apparent, infusing content about spirituality and religion into counselor education programs becomes imperative for training counselors who are equipped to manage value-based conflicts and address spiritual/religious issues with clients.

Spirituality/Religion in Counselor Education

Henriksen et al. (2015) determined that personal development, which includes awareness, sensitivity, knowledge, and personal understanding, was an area that should be addressed in

counselor training. This suggests that if counseling students are going to adequately support clients who are dealing with spiritual/religious issues, they would benefit from having the opportunity to explore their own spiritual/religious identity in their training programs. There is a copious amount of literature around integrating spirituality/religion in counseling with limited studies on how this is addressed in counselor training. An examination of professional standards, counselor identity development, and current spiritual/religious training in counselor education will provide context for what conservative Christian students may be experiencing in their training programs.

Professional Standards

As outlined in Chapter One, the ACA Code of Ethics (2014), which applies to professional counselors and counselors-in-training, encourages counselors to respect the diverse spiritual and religious beliefs of clients, while also recognizing the potential influence of those beliefs on the counseling process. Counselors are expected to be culturally sensitive and to avoid imposing their own beliefs and values onto clients (ACA, 2014). Additionally, counselors are encouraged to seek out additional training and education to adequately address any spiritual or religious issues that emerge during their counseling practice (ACA, 2014).

In the standards published in 2016, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) specified that part of the foundation of a counselor's professional identity is the knowledge necessary to practice in a multicultural and pluralistic society. Pluralism embraces the idea that "distinct ethnic, racial, religious, and social groups coexist and cooperatively work toward the interdependence needed for the enhancement of each group…and belief that all members of society benefit when diverse groups participate fully in the dominant society, yet maintain their differences" (CACREP, 2016, p. 43). CACREP requires

that the counseling curriculum address social and cultural diversity, specifically how spiritual beliefs impact the worldview of both the counselor and the client (CACREP, 2016).

Similarly, the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) require awareness and understanding of "social identities, social group statuses, power, privilege, oppression, strengths, limitations, assumptions, attitudes, values, beliefs, and biases" and skills/action that further cultivate that awareness and understanding (Ratts et al., 2016, p. 49). Multiculturalism encompasses a wide range of cultural aspects including race/ethnicity, class/socioeconomic status, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, and spiritual/religious beliefs (Henry & Li, 2022). Though covered under the umbrella of multiculturalism, spirituality/religion is often glossed over with limited opportunities for counseling students to explore their own spiritual/religious identity or how it intersects with other cultural factors (Magaldi-Dopman, 2014). It is important to note that the cultural component of spirituality/religion has been associated with marginalization and oppression and failing to properly tend to the growth and development of counselors who are competent in the area of spirituality/religion can result in clinicians who are culturally insensitive, ultimately leading to client harm (Hall et al., 2010; Sue & Sue, 2019).

In 2009, The Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) released the empirically based *Competencies for Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling,* as the result of several town hall meetings, working groups, and spirituality summits (Cashwell & Watts, 2010). The ASERVIC Competencies (2009) complement the CACREP standards and the ACA Code of Ethics by stating that counselors should respect cultural differences and approach clinical work recognizing the value and individuality of people and their sociocultural backgrounds. Competent counselors are expected to be able to describe

the similarities and differences of spirituality and religion, identify the basic tenets of major spiritual/religious systems, and recognize that a client's spiritual/religious belief or lack thereof are part of their worldview and can impact their functioning (ASERVIC, 2009). The ASERVIC Competencies (2009) also emphasize the importance of counselor's being aware of their own spiritual/religious beliefs and how they might affect the counseling process, calling attention to the intricate relationship between professional and personal identity.

Balancing Professional and Personal Identity

Researchers support the developmental nature of counselor identity, suggesting that the formation of a strong professional identity usually begins during master's-level counseling programs and evolves throughout one's career (Woo et al., 2017). This uniquely positions counselor educators to make an impact on the professional identity of counselors-in-training, offering the opportunity to assist students with reconciling their personal and professional identities. Gibson et al. (2010) posited that counselors move through a series of transformational tasks in their professional identity development, going from dependance on instruction from experts and a desire for external validation to assuming responsibility for their professional growth. Counseling students' ability to integrate their personal and professional identities happens in the final stages of their training, cementing the critical role of counselor education programs in helping trainees integrate professional and personal identity (Gibson et al., 2010).

The discord between professional and personal religious identity, especially around working with LGBT clients, has been well-documented in the literature (Avent Harris et al., 2017; Biddell, 2014; Whitman & Biddell, 2014). What is often overlooked are the ways that religious beliefs can complement professional identity, assisting counselors in their clinical work, and, in some cases, exceeding secular standards (Avent Harris et al., 2017; Klemashevich,

2021). Integration of professional and personal identities for religious students begins with the development of those with a formative role in their training; faculty and mentors who have mastered integration can create space where integration can be modeled and taught, eventually giving students opportunities to experience and practice integration in their own clinical work (French, 2023; Garzon & Lewis Hall, 2012). This might prove difficult given the limited spiritual/religious diversity among counseling faculty, reinforcing the perception among religiously conservative students that diversity is not valued in counseling programs (Giordano et al., 2018).

Spiritual/Religious Training

Considered cultural factors, spirituality and religion are expected to be included in curricula related to social and cultural diversity and addressed as part of multiculturalism (CACREP, 2016; Magaldi-Dopman, 2014; Smith et al., 2019). Existing literature suggests that current counselor training about spirituality and religion is inadequate, and counselors do not feel fully prepared to address spiritual/religious identity when counseling (Henriksen et al, 2015). Not only do counselors-in-training feel inadequately prepared to address these issues with clients, but they have also not had opportunities to explore these issues for themselves (Magaldi-Dopman, 2014). Counselors have acknowledged the significance of the multicultural course in their development but emphasize that a single class is insufficient and believe that spiritual and religious content should receive more attention in its own course or another discussion space (Avent Harris et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2019).

Supervision best practice underscores the importance of supervisors addressing spirituality and religion in their interactions with supervisees (Borders et al., 2014). Supervision is often the place where issues regarding spirituality/religion are addressed and students believe

that discussing these issues in supervision contributed to their competence in the spiritual domain (Henricksen et al., 2015; Hull et al., 2016, Whitman & Bidell, 2014). In addition to institutional affiliation, the perception that spirituality and religion are integrated in supervision has a significant impact on perceived spiritual competence (Secor & Bridges, 2021). Students describe more comfortability in discussing their faith with clinical supervisors (Hunt, 2019), indicating that supervision serves as an important platform for addressing spiritual and religious matters.

As demonstrated in the examination of spiritual/religious values in counseling, values-based conflicts are one of the most common issues experienced by religious students. Ethical bracketing, developed by Kocet & Herlihy (2014), was designed to help counselors navigate personal or professional value-based conflicts with clients, supervisees, and/or students and may prove helpful in addressing religious value conflicts. Ethical bracketing is the process of "setting aside personal values…to provide ethical and appropriate counseling to all clients especially those whose worldviews, values, belief systems, and decisions differ significantly from those of the counselor" (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014, p. 182). Ethical bracketing involves a) immersing yourself in self-reflection and awareness, b) educating yourself about ethical codes of conduct and professional literature around best practices, c) seeking out consultation and/or supervision to help with the conflict, d) actively participating in the supervision process, and e) engaging in your own personal counseling to identify barriers and work through personal biases (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014).

The Counselor Values-Based Conflict Model (CVCM), also developed by Kocet and Herlihy is a five-step process designed to help counselors explore value-based conflicts at a personal and/or professional level (Grunhaus et al., 2018). The two-pronged approach of the CVCM begins with determining the nature of the value-based conflict (i.e., personal or

professional); personal value conflicts are related to the counselor's personal values while professional value conflicts revolve around professional competence and skill (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014). After the nature of the conflict is identified, counselors should explore the core issues and possible barriers to providing care, seek assistance or remediation for providing the necessary standard of care, determine and evaluate potential courses of action, and then ensure that those proposed actions promote client wellbeing (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014). While ethical bracketing, the CVCM and other tools might be helpful in navigating religious value conflicts, they may not be covered in sufficient depth during counselor training to impact student development.

Scholars identify several barriers to spiritual/religious integration in counselor education programs despite a need for more robust training around spirituality/religion (Lu et al., 2020). In their study on integrating religion and spirituality in counselor education, Adams et. al (2015) learned from seasoned counselor educators that, from their perspective, the major hindrances of sufficient training are lack of information and lack of personal interest or relevance. Other barriers to adequate preparation include reluctance to include spirituality/religion in curriculum, a perceived lack of competence amongst counselor educators and supervisors, the belief in the separation of church and state, and the tendency to minimize the significance of spirituality/ religion in the counseling process (Anekstein et al., 2018).

Another barrier to spiritual/religious integration in counselor education may be related to a lack of psychological safety and inclusivity in training programs. Learning thrives in environments that foster psychological safety and embrace diversity; psychological safety is the collective belief that a space is safe enough for interpersonal risk-taking and encourages individuals to express themselves authentically (Giordano et al., 2018). Students have shared experiences of concealing or withholding aspects of their religious/spiritual identity over

concerns about not being accepted (Giordano et al., 2018). Schaefer (2006) discovered that religiously conservative Christian students encounter negative perceptions of Christians from both faculty and colleagues. Conservative Christian students reported that positive experiences in their programs led to them being more open and less judgmental while difficult experiences resulted in them feeling singled out, defensive, and fearful (Schaefer, 2006).

The integration of spirituality and religion in both counseling and counselor education is paramount for providing holistic and culturally responsive client care. Respecting client's values and seeking to understand spirituality and religion's influence on client worldview is significant across all faith traditions and belief systems. While acknowledging the diversity of spiritual and religious perspectives, my focus will primarily center on Christianity, recognizing its status as the world's largest religion (Vaughan, 2020).

Christianity

Around 75% of the American population aligns with a religious faith (Jones, 2021). Within this demographic, approximately 64% identify themselves as Christian (Pew Research Center, 2022). This underscores the likelihood that counselors will encounter clients who consider Christianity to be a part of their spiritual or religious identity. To better understand the experiences of counseling graduate students with conservative Christian values, it is imperative that we explore the historical context, fundamental beliefs, and current landscape of Christianity in the United States.

History and Core Beliefs

Christianity has a rich history spanning over two millennia and is one of the world's largest religions with approximately 30 percent of the global population identifying as Christian (Melton, 2010; Pelikan, 2005). A monotheistic religion, Christianity emerged from within

Judaism during the 1st century in the region of ancient Palestine, with Jesus, a Jewish teacher from Galilee, as its central figure (Melton, 2010; Shelley, 2008). Jesus is considered by Christians to be the promised Messiah prophesied in Jewish scripture who promoted a message of compassion, repentance, and grace throughout his ministry; his crucifixion in Jerusalem by Roman authorities and his subsequent resurrection are central events of the Christian faith (Pelikan, 2005; Shelley, 2008). After Jesus' death and resurrection, his disciples, led by figures like the Apostles Peter and Paul, spread his teachings throughout the Roman Empire and beyond; it was in Antioch, modern-day Syria, where the followers of Christ were first called Christians (Melton, 2010).

Early Christian communities faced intermittent persecution by Roman emperors, notably under Nero in the 1st century, Decius during the 2nd century, and Diocletian in the 3rd century (Chadwick, 1993; Melton, 2010). Though Christianity initially faced persecution, the religion gradually gained followers becoming a significant religious movement by the 4th century spurred, in part, by the conversion of Constantine to Christianity (Melton, 2010; Pelikan, 2005). Constantine’s conversion eventually led to the Edict of Milan in 313 which validated Christianity as a religion and provided favored status within the empire (Melton, 2010).

As Christianity became more widespread, several councils were held to establish core doctrine and resolve conflicting theological opinions. The first of these was the Council of Nicaea which was commissioned by Constantine in 325; the Nicene Creed, which outlines fundamental beliefs including the Trinity (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) and the duality of Christ's nature, was a product of that gathering (Melton, 2010). Subsequent councils, like the Council of Ephesus in 431 and the Council of Chalcedon in 451, clarified Christian

doctrine concerning Christ's humanity and divinity (Chadwick, 1993; Melton, 2010; Shelley, 2008).

Over time, Christianity split into various denominations, including Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism, each with distinct theological views and practices (Melton, 2010; Pelikan, 2005). The Great Schism of 1054 marked the split between the Eastern and Western sects with further fragmentation occurring during the 16th century with the Protestant Reformation (Melton, 2010; Pelikan, 2005). The Western branch, centered in Rome, evolved into Roman Catholicism, while the Eastern branch, based in Constantinople, became the Eastern Orthodox Church (Melton, 2010).

The Protestant Reformation, sparked by Martin Luther, challenged the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and led to the formation of Protestant denominations (González, 2010; Pelikan, 2005). Christianity continued to evolve with the emergence of various denominations and theological movements. The spread of Christianity to North and South America, Africa, Asia, and other continents through colonialism and missionary efforts significantly shaped global Christianity (González, 2010). Theological and doctrinal differences continue around an assortment of issues including pluralism, secularism, LGBTQ+ rights, gender roles, and social justice (Melton, 2010; Shelley, 2008).

While interpretations may vary among denominations, Christians generally adhere to several core beliefs. Most Christians believe in the Trinity: one God existing in the three distinct persons of the Father, Son (Jesus Christ), and Holy Spirit (Pelikan, 2005). From a soteriological perspective, Christians believe that Jesus' death and resurrection provide salvation and forgiveness of sins for humanity (McGrath, 2012; Pelikan, 2005) Christians regard the Bible as sacred scripture, comprised of the Old Testament taken from the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh and

the New Testament, which contains accounts of Jesus' life, teachings, and details about the early Christian Church (Melton, 2010; Pelikan, 2005). Sacraments, such as baptism and communion, are sacred rituals that play an important role in Christian tradition, but their practice can vary across denominations (Pelikan, 2005). Many Christians anticipate the return of Jesus Christ, a belief central to eschatology or the study of the end times (Coakley & Sterk, 2004; McGrath, 2012).

Christianity has become one of the world's largest religions, with followers across continents and cultures. This geographical and cultural heterogeneity is also reflected in the diversity of thought and practice. This becomes particularly evident when examining Christianity in America, where approximately 70% of the population identifies as Christian but are spread across nearly a hundred denominations (Pew Research Center, n.d.).

Christianity in America

Christianity in the United States plays a significant role in the nation's history, culture, and identity. The roots of Christianity in America can be traced back to the colonial era, where various Christian groups played a significant role in the establishment of colonies; settlers from Spain, Portugal, and France were mostly associated with Roman Catholicism with German, English, Swedish, and Dutch settlers mainly identifying as Protestant (Allitt, 2003). Denominationalism has long been characteristic of Christianity in North America, likely a reflection of what occurred during the colonial period when different groups laid claim to specific areas – Puritans in the north, Catholics in Maryland and Baptists in Rhode Island (Albanese, 2005; González, 2010).

Christianity has been a driving force in social and political movements throughout America’s history, often at the center of debates about social issues ranging from slavery to

teaching evolution in schools to civil rights (Allitt, 2003). During The Great Awakening in the 18th century, there was a shift towards personal conversion and fervent spiritual experiences, which was felt across all thirteen colonies (González, 2010). In the 19th century, Christianity played a critical role in abolitionist movements, with many Christians advocating for the end of slavery because of its immorality (Albanese, 2005).

By the 20th century, moral purity had become a central theme in Christian communities, leading to the end of slavery and the successful passing of the Prohibition Amendment in 1919 (Albanese, 2005; González, 2010). Christianity continued to influence social and political spheres in the U.S. during the Civil Rights movement and around other issues like legalized abortion and the use of nuclear weapons (Allitt, 2003). The 80's and 90's saw the decline of mainline Protestant denominations (e.g., Presbyterian, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran) and the growth of conservative Protestant groups (e.g., Evangelical, Fundamentalist, Charismatic, Pentecostal), as well as Roman Catholicism (Shelley, 2008).

In recent years, Christianity in America has faced challenges and shifts in demographics, with declining church attendance among younger generations and a growing number of people who feel they have become more spiritual but not more religious (Jones, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2024; Shelley, 2008). Despite its enduring influence, Christianity in America is not monolithic, covering a diverse array of Christian denominations, ranging from conservative evangelicalism to liberal Protestantism, Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and various non-denominational movements (Hollinger, 2022; Pew Research Center, n.d.). This diversity reflects the pluralistic nature of American society, where individuals are free to practice their faith according to their own beliefs and convictions but issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage,

and religious freedom continue to be hotly debated within the context of Christian morality and ethics and have found their way into the American political landscape (Shelley, 2008).

In addition to tensions that exist between sects of Christianity, tensions also exist between the beliefs of individuals within some of these groups and the overall ethos of the counseling profession, which emphasizes client autonomy and self-determination (Francis & Dugger, 2014). This tension can move from ideological to practical when, for example, a client presents in counseling for support in deciding whether to abort an unwanted pregnancy. A counselor with a strong personal pro-life belief might struggle with the ethical principle of autonomy and be at risk of imposing values, deemed unethical in the counseling profession (ACA Code of Ethics, 2014, Standard A.4.b).

Conversely, a counselor who considers themselves pro-choice may want to guide the client in a particular direction or struggle with clients who make life decisions based on their religious beliefs. While counselors can impose values from either a conservative or liberal bias, it is those students and professionals with a more conservative orientation whose stance on social issues are most often influenced by their personal beliefs (Biddell, 2014). For this reason, the focus of this study is on counseling students with conservative Christian beliefs and values, and it is to this subgroup that we now turn our attention.

Conservative Christianity

The Civil War caused significant divisions among denominations, while the period following it saw the emergence of tension between liberal and conservative factions within those denominations (Albanese, 2005). Conservative Christianity can be difficult to define because it covers many denominations and faith traditions with varying beliefs; however, most conservative Christians tend to uphold traditional moral values, trust the authority and infallibility of scripture,

and believe in God's active involvement in daily life (Belcher, 2006). Generally, conservative Christians prioritize spiritual matters over social issues and embrace morality established by religion rather than secular morality (Belcher, 2006; Shelley, 2008). It is common for people to conflate conservative Christians and Christian fundamentalists; while there are some overlapping beliefs and principles, conservative Christians are more open to modernism (Belcher, 2006).

The labels used to describe Christians – mainline, evangelical, liberal/progressive, conservative – can be polarizing and ambiguous, creating division without fully capturing the range of Christian beliefs and practices (Hollinger, 2022). It can be difficult to ignore the connection between religion and politics that has been present for centuries, becoming more prominent during the 20th century (Shelley, 2008). Christianity continues to have a vibrant social influence, amidst swirling political debates with Christian advocates on both sides (Allitt, 2003). The so-called 'Religious Right,' who are often labeled as conservative or evangelical, found their political home within the Republican Party which has historically preferred limited government involvement (Shelley, 2008). It is important to note that increased religiosity is often correlated with political conservatism in major religious groups including Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims and though humanitarianism is considered a common value across religions, it is often directed mostly toward in-group members (Hall et al., 2010).

The convergence of religion and politics in America has led to a rise in Christian nationalism: the belief that Christianity should have a prominent role in civil society in the United States, intertwining American and Christian identities and merging their historical narratives to create a specific set of ideals (Perry et al., 2022; Whitehead et al., 2018). Christian nationalism may lead to distrust of secular authorities, particularly those in government, the scientific community, and academia (Perry et al., 2022). Christian nationalism had a significant

influence on the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, with Donald Trump repeatedly emphasizing the perceived departure of America from its Christian heritage (Whitehead et al., 2018). Appeals to Christian nationalism, both past and present, frequently display explicit evangelical characteristics, inherently suggesting the exclusion of other religious beliefs or cultural identities while dismissing the ecumenical approach taken by most liberal or progressive Christians (Hollinger, 2022; Whitehead et al., 2018).

Religious groups can possess characteristics that contribute to ingroup thinking which may lead to religious othering and other forms of oppression (Nelson, 2009). It is also possible, however, that students with conservative religious values will experience discrimination in their training programs. In a study exploring college students' level of sympathy for Anti-Christian discrimination, Hyers and Hyers (2008) found that there was less sympathy for occurrences of Anti-Christian prejudice than for racist or sexist incidents which may be attributed to Christians not being considered as a disadvantaged or marginalized group and the belief that being a Christian is a choice. In a connected study about the discrimination that conservative Christian students experienced at a secular university, participants reported encountering discrimination at a frequency similar to other commonly researched groups although, interestingly, a small number of the participants struggled with labeling these incidents as discrimination, preferring to associate them with persecution, which is expected by most Christians, rather than prejudice (Hyers & Hyers, 2008).

Conservative Christian students describe experiencing stereotyping, hostility, exclusion, difficulty interacting, and derogation from other students, some of whom also identify as Christian (Hyers & Hyers, 2008). This is consistent with research that suggests that Christian counseling students experience training programs as anti-religious and do not feel comfortable

sharing their faith, fearing that they would be misunderstood, offend others, or be judged (Abbey & Gubi, 2022). Christian students tend to seek support and supervision from other Christians amidst concerns that non-Christians will find it difficult to understand their experiences (Abbey & Gubi, 2022). There are studies, like those mentioned, that focus on the experiences of conservative Christian students or counselors-in-training who identify as Christian. Still, there are gaps in the literature around the experiences of counseling graduate students with conservative Christian values in secular training programs.

Gaps in the Literature

Based on the literature reviewed, it is evident that spirituality and religion are essential components of cultural identity, warranting their consideration in both counseling practice and counselor education. While there is a wealth of literature on client spirituality and religion and integrating spirituality/religion in the counseling process, there is less research around the spiritual/religious identity of counselors-in-training and how this facet of identity impacts their training experience and clinical work. Researchers such as Hunt (2019) have explored the training experiences of religious counseling students in general. Other researchers have focused on the experiences of counseling students at Christian institutions (Spies, 2020), politically conservative counseling students at public universities (Orrison, 2023), and conservative Christian students at secular universities (Hyers & Hyers, 2008). There is limited scholarship, however, that specifically highlights the experiences of conservative Christian counseling students in secular CACREP-accredited training programs.

Brandt (2022) piloted a research study exploring the experiences of White evangelical Christian students' faith disorientation in counselor education programs but noted in the study that evangelical and conservative are not synonymous and only captured the experiences of

White students. The single identifiable research study that addresses the experiences of conservative Christian students attending secular, accredited counseling and counseling psychology programs is almost twenty years old and is limited in its ethnic and geographical diversity (Schaefer, 2006). The rise of Christian Nationalism and the escalation of political and religious polarization in the United States in recent years (Perry, 2022) underscores the necessity of more contemporary research.

Social Constructivism

Interpretive frameworks or paradigms, like worldviews, shape the beliefs and actions of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In qualitative research, the philosophical assumptions of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology are embedded within the interpretive framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The use of social constructivism as an interpretive framework aligns with heuristic inquiry, the chosen methodology for this study (Sultan, 2019).

Constructivism combines various theories into a unified framework, blending behaviorist and cognitive principles; it asserts that learning involves the construction of meaning, with individuals making sense of their experiences (Amineh & Asl, 2015). While often used interchangeably, social constructivism and social constructionism share some concepts but diverge in focus: social constructionism leans toward psychology, whereas social constructivism considers systemic and relational factors (Cottone, 2007). The origins of social constructivist theory can be traced to the work of various scholars like John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Lev Vygotsky, and Jean Piaget (Pfadenhauer & Knoblauch, 2019). The emergence of social constructivist theory as a research paradigm can be found across many disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and education (Adams, 2006; Amineh & Asl, 2015; Pfadenhauer & Knoblauch, 2019).

Social constructivism lends itself to a study of this nature because of its emphasis on how social factors influence learning (Adams, 2006). Spiritual/religious beliefs and values can be informed by our engagement with others and can be a source of conflict in both educational and clinical environments (Abbey & Gubi, 2022; Francis & Dugger, 2014; Giordano et al., 2018; Hunt, 2019). Social constructivism proposes that knowledge is developed in the context of community and not as isolated individuals, which means that what we believe together with our community can become our truth (Cottone, 2007). This may explain why it can be difficult for people who experience religious socialization in conservative environments to adjust when they are immersed in a new community with divergent beliefs.

Social constructivism delves into how social factors shape meaning-making within specific contexts (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011), which is critical to understanding how religiously conservative counselors-in-training actively construct meaning throughout their learning journey. With the goal of interpreting the meaning that participants have about their experience, research that employs social constructivism as an interpretive framework relies heavily on the participants' views (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Exploring the experiences of counseling graduate students with conservative Christian views and how those views have been influenced by social interactions and societal norms, can enhance teaching and supervision related to spiritual and religious identity and, perhaps, improve the developmental process for those with more conservative religious views.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the literature on spirituality and religion in counseling, spiritual/religious identity development, the influence of spiritual/religious values on the counseling process, and how spirituality and religion are being addressed in counselor

training. The chapter also offered insight into the history of Christianity and its core beliefs, Christianity in America past and present, and the characteristics of conservative Christianity. Finally, gaps in the existing literature were established to solidify the need for the study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The present study was a qualitative inquiry designed to explore the lived experiences of counseling graduate students who consider themselves to have conservative Christian values. The aim of the study was to assist educators, supervisors, and researchers in understanding how counseling students with conservative Christian values interpret their own spiritual/religious identity and how that impacts the way they experience secular counseling training programs. Qualitative approaches allow researchers to listen to experiences of participants without hypothesizing (Prosek & Gibson, 2021), which is why a qualitative research design was selected over quantitative. The following chapter begins with an explanation of the interpretive framework and qualitative research design used in this study. Next, it outlines the research questions and the role of the researcher and concludes with a description of the methodology, including data collection procedures, data analysis and trustworthiness.

Interpretive Framework

Constructivist developmental theory, which is the basis of social constructivism, suggests that counselors-in-training are actively making meaning during the learning process (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Knowledge is co-constructed through experience not as passive observers but as active participants (Goodyear et al., 2014). In literature, social constructivism often is used interchangeably with social constructionism. There are some shared foundational concepts, but social constructionism is based mostly on psychology while social constructivism considers systems and relationships (Cottone, 2007).

Social constructivism considers the influence of social factors on meaning-making within a specific context (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Research through a social constructivist lens focuses on the participants' view of an issue and seeks to make sense of the meaning behind

those views (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Understanding how counseling graduate students experience the world, which is informed by their interactions with others and influenced by social and cultural norms, can lead to more effective teaching and supervision, particularly around spiritual/religious identity. A social constructivist lens considers that meanings are heterogenous and plentiful and is actively searching for the complexity within the views (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Social constructivism dismisses the notion of universal truth and embraces the belief that truth can be defined through a multiplicity of perspectives and voices (Hays & Singh, 2012). A social constructivist lens allows room for varied experiences which is essential given the nuanced and idiosyncratic nature of religion and spirituality. Heuristic inquiry, which was the approach selected for this study, falls within the social constructivism paradigm (Sultan, 2019).

Heuristic Inquiry

Heuristic inquiry shares many similarities with phenomenology as both approaches are focused on the patterns present in a specific human experience (Hays & Singh, 2012). Phenomenology, based on the work of Edmund Husserl is concerned with how the individual experiencing the phenomenon makes meaning of it and is the qualitative approach most suited to exploring the meaning made by several individuals around their lived experiences with a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology promote embracing the traditional aspects of philosophy, abandoning presuppositions about what is real, acknowledging the intentionality of consciousness, and accepting that the reality of something is embedded within the meaning of an individual's experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

There are several types of phenomenological research that have been well-documented in the literature, but heuristic inquiry differs primarily in the role of the researcher; heuristic inquiry moves beyond the experience of the phenomenon to how the person relates to that experience (Hays & Singh, 2012). Despite the overlaps with phenomenology, pioneers of heuristic inquiry have maintained it as a discrete qualitative research method (Sultan, 2019). Douglass and Moustakas (1985) contended that heuristic inquiry is distinct from phenomenology in four ways: 1) phenomenology encourages separation and subjectivity but heuristics encourages relationship and connection, 2) in phenomenology the researcher derives "definitive descriptions of the structure of experiences…heuristics leads to depiction of essential meanings " (p. 43), 3) the end goal of phenomenology is a distillation of the experience, but heuristics concludes with the synthesis of knowledge, insight, and implicit understanding, and 4) phenomenology captures the significance of the experience while heuristics preserves the essence of the person in the experience.

Douglass and Moustakas (1985) presented a three-step model specific to heuristic inquiry:

(a) Immersion (exploration of the question, problem, or theme)

(b) Acquisition (collection of data)

(c) Realization (synthesis)

In each of these phases, there are several processes essential to heuristic research that affected the present study. During the immersion phase, as the researcher explores the question, indwelling, or turning inward, and self-search help expand the researcher's comprehension of the experience so that it can be understood holistically (Sultan, 2019). In the immersion phase, the researcher is fully focused on the question to develop a better understanding of it through self-

searching but also through interacting with the literature and other sources of knowledge (Moustakas, 1990). Immersion is an organic and emergent process that requires the primary researcher to internalize the research question to the extent that the "researcher lives the question in waking, sleeping, and even dream states" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 27). For me, this involved daily reflection, engaging with relevant literature, and, whenever possible, making connections between my everyday interactions and conversations and the phenomenon being studied.

In the acquisition phase, the researcher begins to collect data and tacit knowing and intuition are key parts of the process (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). Tacit knowing is the dynamic process of understanding the phenomenon based on past and present experience (Sultan, 2019). We do this by understanding more about the individual parts so that we might develop a sense of a phenomenon holistically (Moustakas, 1990). In the heuristic process, intuition is the space between the explicit and the implicit or tacit; intuition is necessary to identify connections and make inferences, which is essential in research (Moustakas, 1990). When the researcher arrives at the realization phase, they are working to synthesize the data and findings in a manner that accurately depicts the experience as a whole (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas 1990).

I selected heuristic inquiry because the phenomenon being studied has personal meaning for me and the research itself impacted my own knowledge and awareness (Hays & Singh, 2012). Moustakas (1990) suggested that the topic or question that is the search's focal point originates from within the researcher. My own experience as a counseling graduate student who was raised with conservative Christian values spurred my interest in the experiences of other students with similar values. In heuristic inquiry, the participants are an essential part of the research process; they are not viewed as passive examinees but as active partners, so the term co-

researcher also can be used to describe their role in the study (Sultan, 2019). Participant experiences are the linchpin of qualitative research; given their importance, the participants in this study were considered co-researchers and are referred to as such in the remaining chapters.

Research Questions

The research questions that were addressed through this study are:

1. *What are the lived experiences of counseling students with conservative Christian values in secular counselor training programs?*
2. *How do counseling students with conservative Christian values make sense of their spiritual/religious identity?*

Role of the Researcher

Heuristic inquiry begins with "immersion, self-dialogue, and self-exploration" (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 43); as such, the background and experiences of the primary researcher are a substantial part of the research process. When reflecting on my own journey, I recognized that the complexities of spiritual/religious identity were not something I frequently thought about growing up. My Christian identity was passed down to me from my parents in the same way as treasured heirlooms, communal stories, and prized traditions. Attending church, including Sunday School, was my grandmother's mandate for my father which he, in turn, instituted for his children. I was required to wake up early on Sunday mornings so we could make our way to a small A.M.E. Zion church in a rural part of Maryland where I, along with the other children in our congregation, learned the A.M.E. Zion catechism, memorized passages of scripture, and regularly participated in the worship services. It was there that I was taught what it was supposed to mean to love God and live holy.

I carried those values and principles with me through my childhood and teenage years and though I was still trying to figure out who I was as an individual, I was very aware that being a Christian was a significant part of that. I had built a successful career in finance but was bi-vocational for most of that time, spending many years working in congregational ministry. During that period, I often engaged in ministry to people who were struggling to reconcile their religious identity with other cultural factors, most commonly sexual/affectional expression or gender identity. I did my best to provide support based on where I was in my own religious identity development. At some point, I decided to fully lean into a helping profession and enrolled in a dual-degree Master of Divinity/MA in Counseling program.

Fast forward fifteen years, in the middle of my divinity school journey, many of the things that I was socialized to believe about holy living collided with my evolving beliefs about what it truly meant to love God and love people. My Christian values that I held so dear - that had shaped my worldview - were called into question as I looked into the tearful eyes of someone who had moved beyond the role of friend to the place of sister, as she explained her fear of losing my friendship if she were to simply be her authentic self. There was a new tension in our relationship as we struggled to navigate her recently embraced queer identity and my rapidly expanding Christian identity.

Religious deconstruction involves a critical examination of the beliefs, practices, and institutions associated with a religious tradition with the goal of gaining better understanding, addressing incongruence, and potentially reframing beliefs in a way that is more aligned with your personal ethos. The idea of deconstruction and the ways that theological education might accelerate that process was not new to me. I had several friends that had graduated from

seminary who shared that the experience had challenged their religious socialization, forcing them to reevaluate what they believed about the Divine.

The process of deconstructing my religious beliefs had started years before, although those were small chips in the hardened surface using a chisel. That chisel had now morphed into a sledgehammer focused on demolishing the spiritual/religious framework I had constructed over my thirty-five years of living. Fortunately, I was doing this soul work in the context of a supportive community and, rather than completely decimating my beliefs, this was a soft demolition that allowed me to transform my problematic views into spiritual/religious values that felt more compassionate, congruent, and Christ-centered.

Data Collection Procedures

Sampling

Following the Immersion phase, data was collected in the Acquisition phase and synthesized in the Realization phase. In phenomenology and related approaches, participants are considered experts of the phenomenon being studied (Hays & Singh, 2012) so the selection of co-researchers is critical. To promote homogeneity in the sample, I employed purposive sampling to identify co-researchers with insight into the specific experience. In purposive sampling, also referred to as purposeful sampling, individuals are selected because of their ability to "purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon" being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 326).

I used criterion and snowball sampling, which are types of purposeful sampling, to identify co-researchers for this study. Criterion sampling lends itself to studying a specific phenomenon because the researcher can confirm the sufficiency of the participants using predetermined criteria (Hays & Singh, 2012). Snowball sampling, which allows participants to

identify other people they know that have experience with the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018), was used in addition to criterion sampling. The criteria are described in the 'Co-researchers' section.

Recruitment Strategy

Participants were recruited through criterion and snowball sampling. After creating a recruitment flyer, I distributed it and information about the study using Listservs (i.e., CESNET and COUNSGRADS), social media platforms (i.e., Facebook and Instagram), and contacts in CACREP-accredited counseling programs. To secure a more racially/ethnically diverse sample, I sent the call to program coordinators at several Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCUs) and Minority-Serving Institutions. Interested parties expressed their interest by completing a brief form through Qualtrics to determine if the participation criteria were met. Co-researchers were offered a $25 Amazon gift card as an incentive.

In addition to the established criteria, co-researchers were also asked to complete a modified version of the Multidimensional Religious Ideology Scale (MRIS) to assess their orientation towards conservative Christian beliefs. Fifteen items from the Belief and Praxis subscales were included as high scores on these specific questions typically reflect a conservative orientation (Wildman et al., 2021). The wording of the questions was adjusted to focus specifically on Christianity as opposed to any religious or spiritual tradition. The questions were answered using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). An average score of 53 on the modified scale would represent neutrality, so respondents who score below 60 likely do not have a strong conservative orientation and may not be ideal for this study. As such, only interested parties who score 60 or above on the

modified MRIS were invited to interview. A copy of the modified MRIS is provided in Appendix B.

Co-researchers

The criteria for co-researchers were as follows: 1) must be a masters-level counseling student currently enrolled or recently graduated (within the past year) from a secular counseling training program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), 2) must identify as having conservative Christian values as evidenced by a score of 60 or above on the MRIS, and 3) must have completed coursework in multicultural counseling or be currently enrolled in a multicultural course. Current or recently graduated students were the focus of this study because research suggests that as new professionals engage in more clinical work, they move further along in their professional identity development (Moss et al., 2014), so it was important to explore these experiences while students are still merging their personal and professional identities.

The need to reconcile religious/spiritual identity with professional identity will arise out of curriculum about social and cultural diversity which may not be a requirement in non-accredited programs but is part of the 2024 CACREP Standards (CACREP, 2023) which is why CACREP accreditation was a criterion. Students may encounter less religious/spiritual dissonance when surrounded by peers with similar views, so the study highlighted experiences at secular institutions rather than including religiously affiliated institutions. Although the topic of religion/spirituality can surface at any point during a counseling program, as a facet of potentially salient identities, it should be covered in multicultural discourse. Selecting participants who have had multicultural training increased the likelihood that they had covered religious/spiritual subject matter and how it relates to counseling. The objective was to recruit

between eight and ten participants with diverse cultural backgrounds, from different training institutions, with varied experiences who met these criteria. I identified 10 co-researchers who met the criteria and scheduled their interviews.

Interviews

After the study co-researchers were identified, I conducted interviews using predefined open-ended questions (see Appendix D) which is one of the interview styles that is considered appropriate for heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). The interview questions were developed with the aim of allowing the co-researcher or participant to share openly about their knowledge of the experience being studied, the salient aspects of the experience, and their thoughts and feelings about the experience (Moustakas, 1990). I also considered my own lived experience and existing literature when formulating the interview questions. The interviews did not have a set length as free-flowing dialogue is the preferred method for heuristics (Moustakas, 1990). The interviews took an average of 30 to 45 minutes to complete, though several of the interviews ran longer. Sultan (2019) recommended that the primary researcher engage in precise and empathic listening while remaining open to the participant but also to oneself. The primary researcher also should be flexible and willing to adjust the interview protocol to facilitate the flow of conversation (Sultan, 2019). The interview questions were designed to help co-researchers comfortably explore their religious/spiritual identity, their Christian values, and how they have influenced their training experience. The interviews were conducted virtually and recorded and then transcribed through Zoom.

Data Analysis

In the Realization phase of heuristic inquiry, available data are systematically reviewed and synthesized. Qualitative data analysis involves organizing the data, coding, identifying themes,

choosing how to represent the data, and developing interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Sultan (2019) recommended processing the interview experiences kinesthetically, cognitively, emotionally, socially-relationally, perceptually, and spiritually while remaining aware of how your identity and experiences influenced the encounter. Moustakas (1990) created an eight-step procedure for analyzing data in heuristics:

(a) Gather all the data from one co-researcher (e.g., recording, transcript, notes).

(b) Immerse yourself in the material until knowledge of the experience is understood.

(c) Set the data aside and then return to it with renewed energy and perspective; review the material again, taking note of characteristics and themes to create an "individual depiction of the experience" (p. 51).

(d) Return to the original data and compare the individual depiction; at this point, it may be shared with the co-researcher to confirm accuracy.

(e) Repeat the first four steps for each research participant until an individual depiction of each experience has been completed.

(f) Gather the individual depictions for all co-researchers and enter another immersion process to discover "the universal qualities and themes" of the experiences; using that knowledge construct a composite depiction of the experience that represents the essence of the phenomenon as experienced by the individual co-researchers and the group.

(g) Return to the raw data and individual depictions and select two or three co-researchers who embody the experience of the group. Create individual portraits

based on the material, merging the phenomenon being studied with the individual.

(h) Develop a creative synthesis that characterizes the phenomenon or experience and captures its essential meaning.

I analyzed the data using these eight steps keeping in mind that the purpose of heuristic analysis is "to understand, with a vision to cocreate new knowledge, make meaning, and foster individual and collective transformation" (Sultan, 2019, p. 146). Typically, in qualitative studies, the researcher is encouraged to bracket, or set aside, their values to avoid imposition and to protect the integrity of the research; bracketing is not expected within heuristic inquiry as the elimination of values is unrealistic and the inquiry itself is derived from the personal experience of the researcher (Sultan, 2019). When identifying preliminary themes, I paid attention to the content (e.g., words, phrases, examples) and the context (e.g., intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics) that arose (Sultan, 2019).

After the interviews were transcribed and organized, I identified preliminary themes and constructed individual depictions for each co-researcher, which can be found in Appendices G through P. At this point in the process, I sent each individual depiction and a copy of the transcript to each co-researcher for their review. Using the themes identified through the individual depictions, I generated a composite depiction of the experience that was used to reveal themes across co-researchers. I developed a creative synthesis capturing the essential meaning of the experience, which is included in my personal reflection in Chapter Five.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness describes the truth or value of your findings and is to qualitative research what validity is to quantitative research (Hays & Singh, 2012). Establishing trustworthiness can

be an arduous task for qualitative methodology and heuristic studies can be evaluated using established qualitative standards (Sultan, 2020). I assessed the trustworthiness of this study using the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981) The following section explains each criterion in more detail and how they were addressed during the research process.

Credibility

Credibility is the degree to which the findings of a study are believable (Hays & Singh, 2012). For naturalistic inquiries, like heuristics, establishing "truth value" requires that the findings be tested with the source of the data (Guba, 1981). Member checking – continuous collaboration with the co-researchers - can enhance the accuracy of the findings and encourage equity and genuineness between the primary researcher and the participants (Sultan, 2019). As part of member checking, the co-researchers had the opportunity to review their transcript and individual depictions.

Other ways to ensure credibility include incorporating multiple information sources (i.e., triangulation) and external review (Sultan, 2019). Triangulation was accomplished through co-researcher interviews and the experience of the primary researcher which constitute diverse data sources. Additionally, I initiated an external review by two outside researchers who examined the transcripts and individual depictions for each co-researcher. The external reviewers were experienced with qualitative research and had backgrounds and research interests that were different from the primary researcher. These strategies were employed throughout the study to increase its credibility.

Transferability

Generalizability is not the desired outcome for qualitative research; instead, researchers attempt to offer sufficient detail of the process so that consumers of the research can determine if the findings can be applied in their context (Hays & Singh, 2012). This similarity between contexts is referred to as transferability (Guba, 1981). To increase trustworthiness around transferability, Sultan (2019) suggests the use of thick description and triangulation. Thick descriptions require that the researcher provide a rich and expansive depiction of the participants, setting, and themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Triangulation, as previously described, involves the inclusion of multiple sources of data. I utilized thick description when describing the co-researchers in their individual depictions and engaged in triangulation (e.g., interviews) to bolster transferability.

Dependability

The dependability of a study rests on the stability and consistency of the findings over time (Hays & Singh, 2012). Additionally, it can involve how the methodology selected aligns with the results of the research (Sultan, 2019). In addition to thick description and triangulation, external review and reflexivity can help establish dependability (Sultan, 2019). Guba (1981) recommended engaging an external auditor to assess dependability. Reflexivity calls for the researcher to share how their experiences and background influence the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To promote dependability, I engaged the support of two external reviewers, addressed my background and experiences when discussing researcher positionality, and kept a reflexive journal.

Confirmability

Confirmability is clearly identifying the connection between the findings and their interpretation to demonstrate that the research is not being unduly influenced by the researcher (Sultan, 2019). Reflexivity and triangulation are two ways to accomplish confirmability (Guba, 1981). I used a reflexive journal to track my interactions with the research (Sultan, 2019) and considered a variety of perspectives as part of triangulation.

Trustworthiness is how qualitative researchers demonstrate the rigor of their work (Sultan, 2019). Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are well known strategies to evaluate trustworthiness in naturalistic inquiries (Guba, 1981). To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, I implemented tools like member checking, external review by researchers with experience with phenomenological inquiry, triangulation, and reflexivity during the research process.

Ethical Considerations

During this study, several steps were taken to protect the co-researchers and ensure that research was conducted according to the ethical standards for research and publication detailed in the ACA Code of Ethics (2014). As a student researcher, I submitted a proposal to the Education Institutional Review Committee (EDIRC) at William & Mary for approval. The proposal provided a rationale for the study, a description of the participation criteria, privacy and confidentiality protocol, and a draft of the consent form. Once authorization was received, prior to conducting interviews, co-researchers were asked to review and sign the informed consent document (see Appendix C) that outlined the nature of the study, data collection procedures, the potential risks and benefits of the research, the limits of confidentiality and the right of the co-researchers to withdraw their consent at any point during the study. The informed consent also

notified co-researchers about the use of pseudonyms to protect their identity and guaranteed access to the interview transcript and the findings.

A Priori Limitations

As with any research project, there are limitations known in advance related to the research approach and the research topic. Though heuristic inquiry provides rich, detailed descriptions, its focus on the experiences of the individual co-researchers makes precise replication difficult which precludes generalizability in the traditional sense (Hays & Singh, 2012). In terms of the research topic, another limitation was the reluctance of co-researchers to be open and transparent around a polarizing subject like religion. I attempted to curtail this by using language (e.g., conservative instead of orthodox or traditional) that empowered co-researchers to acknowledge their religious values despite the stigma that is often associated with conservatism. I was also transparent about my religious identity and my own place in the phenomenon being studied as self-disclosure is a core tenet of heuristic inquiry (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985). Nonetheless, it was not possible to determine how those who responded to the invitation differed systematically from those who choose not to participate. These and other limitations were considered throughout the research process.

Conclusion

This chapter gave an overview of the research design and methodology that was used in the study. It described, in detail, social constructivism and heuristic inquiry which are the interpretive framework and qualitative research design that undergirded the study. The chapter also reiterated the research questions and expounded on the role of the researcher. Finally, the chapter outlined the methodology, addressing data collection, data analysis, and establishing the trustworthiness of the research.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The aim of this study was to explore how counseling students with conservative Christian values perceive their spiritual and religious identity, and how this influences their experiences within secular counseling training programs. Through a social constructivist lens, I utilized heuristic inquiry to better understand the experiences of conservative Christian counseling students. This qualitative study was guided by the following research questions: *What are the lived experiences of counseling students with conservative Christian values in secular counselor training programs? How do counseling students with conservative Christian values make sense of their spiritual/religious identity?*

To address those questions, I completed 10 semi-structured interviews and immersed myself in the resulting data, taking note of emerging themes. In the tradition of heuristic inquiry, I used that information to create individual depictions for each co-researcher, which can be found in Appendices G through P. The amalgamation of the individual depictions allowed me to generate a composite description that reflects the consistent threads across experiences, ultimately leading to the categories and themes presented in this chapter.

Co-Researcher Profiles

In heuristic inquiry, participants play a crucial role in the research process, actively contributing as partners rather than merely serving as passive subjects (Sultan, 2019), as such they are referred to as co-researchers in this study. The following co-researcher profiles were created using information from the demographics questionnaire and the results of the modified version of the Multidimensional Religious Ideology Scale (MRIS), which was used to assess the co-researcher's orientation towards conservative Christian beliefs. As mentioned in the Methodology, the modified version of the MRIS contains fifteen items from the Belief and

Praxis subscales as high scores on these specific questions typically reflect a conservative orientation (Wildman et al., 2021); an average score of 53 on the modified scale would represent neutrality, so respondents who score below 60 likely do not have a strong conservative orientation. The higher the score on the Modified MRIS (M-MRIS), the more oriented the co-researcher is to conservative Christian beliefs. This information is also summarized in Table 1 below.

Amy

Amy was a 36-year-old White heterosexual female who was affiliated with the Mennonite tradition. Amy was in her third year of a cohort-based counseling program at a private liberal arts university in the southern region. Amy scored 78 on the Modified MRIS.

Chelsea

Chelsea was a 29-year-old White heterosexual female who was affiliated with the Evangelical tradition. Chelsea was a recent graduate of a cohort-based counseling program at a public research university in the southern region. Chelsea scored 95 on the Modified MRIS.

Jane

Jane was a 24-year-old White heterosexual female who was affiliated with the Baptist tradition. Jane was in her second year of a cohort-based counseling program at a public research university in the southern region. Jane scored 103 on the Modified MRIS.

Jasmine

Jasmine was a 33-year-old Black heterosexual female who was affiliated with a non-denominational faith community. Jasmine was in her third year of a non-cohort counseling program at a public research university in the southern region. Jasmine scored 95 on the Modified MRIS.

Jeffrey

Jeffrey was a 28-year-old White gay male who was affiliated with the Catholic Church. Jeffrey was in his second year of a non-cohort counseling program at a public research university in the southern region. Jeffrey scored 90 on the Modified MRIS.

Mark

Mark was a 28-year-old White Hispanic heterosexual male who was affiliated with the Anglican Church. Mark was a recent graduate of a cohort-based counseling program at a public research university in the southern region. Mark scored 89 on the Modified MRIS.

Monica

Monica was a 29-year-old Black lesbian female who was affiliated with a non-denominational faith community. Monica was in her first year of a cohort-based counseling program at a public research university in the southern region. Monica scored 64 on the Modified MRIS.

Payton

Payton was a 22-year-old White heterosexual female who was unaffiliated with any Christian denomination or tradition. Payton was in her second year of a cohort-based counseling program at a public research university in the southern region. Payton scored 94 on the Modified MRIS.

Pearl

Pearl was a 33-year-old Black heterosexual female who was affiliated with the Baptist tradition. Pearl was a recent graduate from a non-cohort counseling program at a private research university in the southern region. Pearl scored 100 on the Modified MRIS.

Zoe

Zoe was a 25-year-old Black heterosexual female who was unaffiliated with any Christian denomination or tradition. Zoe was a recent graduate from a cohort-based counseling program at a public research university in the southern region. Zoe scored 66 on the Modified MRIS.

Table 1

Co-Researcher Information

Co-Researcher	Age	Race	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Christian Affiliation	Program Year	M-MRIS Total
Amy	36	White	Female	Straight	Mennonite	3rd Year	78
Chelsea	29	White	Female	Straight	Evangelical	Recent Graduate	95
Jane	24	White	Female	Straight	Baptist	2nd Year	103
Jasmine	33	Black	Female	Straight	Non-Denominational	3rd Year	95
Jeffrey	28	White	Male	Gay	Catholic	2nd Year	90
Mark	27	White (Hispanic)	Male	Straight	Anglican	Recent Graduate	89
Monica	29	Black	Female	Lesbian	Non-Denominational	1st Year	64
Payton	22	White	Female	Straight	Unaffiliated	2nd Year	94
Pearl	33	Black	Female	Straight	Baptist	Recent Graduate	100
Zoe	25	Black	Female	Straight	Unaffiliated	Recent Graduate	66

Categories and Themes

As mentioned, the research questions that guided this study were: *What are the lived experiences of counseling students with conservative Christian values in secular counselor training programs? How do counseling students with conservative Christian values make sense of their spiritual/religious identity?* The themes that emerged covered three categories: (a) Evolving Christian Identity, (b) Emerging Counselor Identity, and (c) Diverse Training Experiences. The themes associated with each category are outlined in the table below and described, in depth, through the remainder of the chapter.

Table 2

Categories and Themes

Categories	Themes
Evolving Christian Identity	Social Influences
	Christian Identity
	Christian Conservatism
Emerging Counselor Identity	Influence of Christian Identity
	Values and Values Imposition
	Personal and Professional Integration
Diverse Training Experiences	Program Characteristics
	Psychological Safety
	Community and Support
	Training Experience

Evolving Christian Identity

Christian identity is a dynamic concept that is shaped by diverse cultural, social, and personal factors. For many, this evolution involves a continuous process of reflection, deconstruction, and reconstruction of faith as individuals respond to internal and external influences. Within this category, three themes were identified: Social Influences, Christian Identity, and Christian Conservatism.

Social Influences

During our exploration of Christian identity, social influences like religious upbringing and peer relationships became a prominent theme in the co-researcher narratives. Nine of the ten co-researchers grew up in and around the church with parents and other close family members who were involved in ministry. Amy's parents were missionaries, Mark's father was a deacon and his grandmother was the church librarian, and Jeffrey's mother served as a church musician. The co-researchers were affiliated with a variety of Christian denominations during their

childhood and adolescent years including the Methodist, Baptist, Evangelical, and Catholic traditions.

Jasmine attended a Missionary Baptist church during her formative years and was very active: "I've been in the church my entire life…Vacation Bible School, Bible Camp, anything with a Bible, I was there." Like Jasmine, Jeffrey and Mark also described being involved in activities at the church and church being a central part of their lives. Like his mother, Jeffrey was a church musician and "had kind of an orientation towards the liturgy and the beautiful things of the church and the community surrounding the church." Jane and Zoe both described Christian values that were shaped by their parents who were often the initiators of co-researcher religious identity. Mark recalled the impact of his mother's religious orientation:

> My mom is very religious. I would say that she can sometimes lean into hyper religiousness which has made certain parts of my religious brain and experience difficult, but it definitely influenced [me]. …She had us memorizing Bible verses and reciting them to her before we were able to play video games, before we were able to do different things.

Having been raised by parents with a strong religious orientation, several co-researchers spoke to the lack of autonomy in their households. Both Monica and Zoe described church attendance not being optional. In Zoe's household, "it was required for us to go to church like every Sunday, and…to give thanks [and] honor God…there was no getting out of that… it doesn't matter if I was tired or if I wanted to do something else."

When asked how her Christian identity has shaped her life experience, Chelsea responded:

> I feel like it's asking a fish how they experience water when you are born within a Christian home. I can't really identify what it would be like without it. So, there is that element of a little bit of a bias there, but at the same time, especially with an adult age, I feel like it is the core of who I am. It's the core of how I see the world. It shapes my worldview. It shapes the way I interact with all people. It shapes the way I interact with myself and the level of compassion I show myself and my own understanding of grace and mercy, what it means to be interconnected to other people. So long story short, it's everything. And it's also incredibly hard to describe, because I've never known a life without it.

In response to a similar question, Pearl, having been raised in West Africa, shared how she was exposed to several different religious traditions:

> There was schism in the household, because, you know, now you are this Baptist Christian, my mom was…who is trying to take the kids to church. …My dad was brought up Catholic and so all his side of the family grew up Catholic…and at some point, he also was in something that you will probably call a cult, which was like a man-made religion. …And also…besides the fact that Catholicism is the most dominant religion, [West African Country] is also very known for traditional practices and voodoo, and you know all the things.

Unlike the other co-researchers, Payton had a different experience with religion growing up:

> As far as my faith background, my mother was raised Catholic but that was never really anything that was like pressured upon us. We didn't really go to church as children. I

have a younger brother as well. But that wasn't really anything that was kind of expected of us. It was more so just kind of coming into our own faith, I guess you could say.

As the co-researchers shared about the relationships that have shaped their Christian identity, other social influences began to emerge. Pearl's mother converted to Christianity because of other family members: "so, you know, [it] started…with my aunts… they're the ones who…introduced us to Christianity. Then my mom started taking us to church at some point." Jeffrey's Christian identity became more important during his high school years as developed more social connections: "because I was involved in a Youth Ministry program at a parish in my town…and I grew with friends and gained friendships with people who had very strong religious convictions in the Catholic Church." Most of Mark's social influence came from mentors, especially during college as he noted: "until recently always had some sort of spiritual mentor in my life. And that has been pretty beneficial for me to continue to grow and learn."

After Payton's best friend introduced her to Christianity in high school, she continued cultivating her connection with other Christians: "my small group in Chi Alpha has been really helpful. My roommates…are…Christian and very wonderful…my one roommate has been in the church a lot longer than I have and so she is always just really open to answering my questions." Like Payton, Zoe "really [values] like friendships and…meaningful connections" and admits that those who are close to her have the "ability to influence and shape" her.

Christian Identity

Despite their different cultural backgrounds and experiences, the co-researchers all acknowledged the impact that their Christian identity has had on their lives, which made way for them to share about the most salient aspects of their Christian identity, their spiritual

development journey, the strengths and challenges related to their Christian identity, and the intersection of their religious identity with other cultural identities.

Several co-researchers said that their Christian identity informs how they handle difficulty, their decision-making process, and even the way that they view others. Having been through "trials…with…family health, medical [issues]…poverty situations," Jane's faith has sustained her: "[I] very much would not have gotten through it without being able to depend on my faith…that's something that [I have been] able to lean on."

Jasmine's Christian identity has influenced her "in every way imaginable" and she cannot "think of a time where [she] wasn't aware of God or wasn't aware of his standards." Similarly, Mark has allowed his Christian identity to guide him: "…it's shaped every part of my life from the decisions that I've made for my future, going to a Christian undergrad school, to shaping the friends that I gravitate towards, to shaping or helping me choose my life partner."

In addition to influencing life decisions, Christian identity also had a profound impact on many of the co-researcher's worldviews. Jeffrey believed that "...Christianity broadly allows for the bringing together of people with like a beautiful direction towards the divine and towards what transcends all of us." Chelsea's Christian lens enabled her to see the "interconnection between other humans, that the Lord created every person in his image, the idea of *imago dei* that each person is born with an inherent like value and worth, that they are created in the image of God. And so, when I'm looking at another person, I'm looking at another image bearer."

Through their responses, several co-researchers implicitly described the evolution of their Christian identity as a process, touching on their spiritual development journey. Jasmine was raised in the church but shared how her spiritual journey included a period of rebellion and time away from organized religion, eventually leading to her returning to her church and becoming a

youth minister. Amy grew up with strong conservative Christian values but because of her experiences, her "faith has gone through a big transformation" though there's "still threads of [conservative values]" there.

Like many of the co-researchers, Mark was reared in a religious household which had a significant impact on his religious identity, and he believed that his experience in his training program was affected by that: "…part of it also might have just been things that I was working through…being raised Christian. I think that there's a lot of ways where my identity was thrust upon me." Perhaps one of the more distinct illustrations of spiritual development came from Zoe:

> I was just really judgmental…I think that's kind of how my faith showed up…since it was not developed. …A lot of how I understood my own faith and other people was being able to see like, are they sinning, or are they not sinning? And if they're sinning, here's judgment. …And so, when it came to high school and meeting other people who did things that…I didn't approve of, since I had my own…sin, I no longer was as judgmental. …That was…a defining…thing that impacted the way I looked at my faith…I too fall short as well.

As co-researchers spoke more about their Christian identity, it became evident that their religious identity comes with strengths and challenges. Several co-researchers considered their faith itself to be a source of strength, using words like *support* and *peace* to describe its benefits. However, Amy spoke to the pressure that she feels as a Christian: "I'm supposed to be a representative of Jesus…and so if I screw up then I'm like misrepresenting him and I don't wanna lead people away from Jesus." Payton expressed concern about the negative interactions that people have had with Christians, leading to church hurt, which is a challenge. Highlighting the

complexity of Christian identity, Jane named several ways that she felt “very strengthened” by her faith but also shared that “it’s also been challenging, because it's also been a source that has added more [stress], and it has felt like more [was] targeted towards me because of that identity. Or it's extra work that I have to do or extra considerations that I have to bring up because it’s things that I value.”

Another challenge that can be linked to Christian identity is intersectionality, which can create a rich tapestry of personal identity with some identities being easier to reconcile than others. Five of the co-researchers explicitly named cultural factors that interact with and inform their Christian identity. Jeffrey spoke to both his sexuality and his Christian identity: “I'm interesting because I am gay…and I'm Christian, and so I have a lot of different, I guess identities…whirling about the room.” Jeffrey added that he is still deciding on his views around gay marriage and is cautious about how he introduces his sexual/affectional orientation: “I get really careful about that. I don't wanna bring [my sexuality] in, and I don't want that to preference me and my views over other people, cause I've seen [what] that has done for other people.

Monica also shared about her experience navigating sexual/affectional and religious identities:

> And so, for a long [time]... all my teenage years, I feel like I hid that part of me because…I couldn't be a Christian and be a lesbian at the same time. I felt like there wasn't going to be acceptance. I feel like I was just going to be shunned, probably kicked out of my church. Like I felt all of these things, and it just took me to realize my own walk with Christ and like the things that I had been through to understand that like God's love for me is going to be whatever it is, regardless of who I am.

Other co-researchers shared their experience with the intersection of spiritual/religious identity with other cultural identities like ethnicity and nationality. As the child of immigrants, Zoe was very aware of the impact that her West African heritage had on her faith:

> When I think about my parents and what I saw about their faith…I believe spirituality and religion is hugely dependent on culture and nationality and those play…more of a factor than what's written scripturally or what denomination that you're in. Where were your parents from? What part of the country or the world are you in? What type of circumstances are you going through? That really shapes the way that you view the narrative of God and the narrative of His people. …I grew up in a spiritual context in which it was a very cultural faith."

Christian Conservatism

Christian conservatism is rooted in biblical interpretation and many Christian conservatives advocate for moral and social policies that align with scripture and their religious beliefs. In describing their conservative values, co-researchers confirmed the broad spectrum of Christian conservatism. Several co-researchers emphasized that they do not consider themselves to be conservative, but it is a label that has been assigned to them by others. Co-researchers identified traits like belief in biblical authority, obedience to God, and the desire for Christian unity as aspects of their Christian identity that might be viewed as conservative. Co-researchers also named sociopolitical issues like abortion, euthanasia, immigration, and LGBTQ+ issues as part of their conservative identity. This demonstrates the tendency for people to conflate political and religious conservatism. Amy is unsure how it occurred but noticed how "your religious identity is also connected to your political identity."

Most of the co-researchers have a mix of conservative and liberal values. For example, Payton considered herself to be a “moderate conservative” with a complex set of values that do not always mesh with the conservative or Christian mindset. Mark viewed the term ‘conservative’ as politically charged and shies away from it:

> I don't know if I would call myself a conservative Christian, because I don't think that I'm a political Christian. ...I think that…there are a lot of ways that I would be considered a conservative Christian. I think that the Bible is truth, and while it's a confusing ancient text that to really understand its meaning, I think it can lead people to salvation. I think that there's certain creeds [from] the early Church, the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, [that]I also I stand by…and I think that would make people [view me as] a conservative Christian.

Christianity’s position as the dominant religion in the United States has fostered a wide range of opinions about the religion itself and those who practice it, especially those who are considered conservative. Consequently, co-researchers described encountering varied perceptions of Christians and Christianity. Jeffrey was concerned that the influence of contemporary philosophical traditions, like postmodernism and critical theory, has caused people to believe that “the fruits of Western society have run their course, and they really don't need to be explored except in the lens of what wrongs they've committed or done today in terms of the Judeo-Christian tradition.” This corresponded with Mark’s belief that “in academia [there is] a general lean away from [Christian] things or a general dismissiveness, even though those things have really helped a lot of people. …it's almost viewed as…unenlightened a little bit.” Chelsea felt that, in counseling programs, “Christians are especially called out a lot for their values and oftentimes values that are perceived as judgmental.” Mark attributed some of these views to

access: “when someone hears Christian a lot of times, they hear what they see most or what is most easily accessible to them…and that's going to be conservative, Evangelical…what's shown on TV.”

Emerging Counselor Identity

As counseling students move through their training process, they start to determine what it means to be a counselor. They embark on a transformative journey that incorporates personal values, theoretical knowledge, and practical experience and their counselor identity begins to emerge. The three themes related to emerging counselor identity were: Influence of Christian Identity, Values and Values Imposition, and Personal and Professional Integration.

Influence of Christian Identity

It was clear that the co-researchers’ Christian identity had a significant influence on their identity as counselors. The co-researchers chose to enter the counseling profession for various reasons, however the desire to help people was a common theme that, for some, stemmed from their Christian identity. Co-researchers, like Chelsea and Jeffrey, acknowledged choosing the counseling profession after being encouraged by other people because of their abilities. Amy felt called by God to “help people” and her work in congregational ministry served as a catalyst for joining the profession after she “became increasingly aware of the need for mental health and just the need of understanding nuance in the church.” Mark experimented with several professions before landing on counseling: “it just kind of made me realize that I think to feel fulfilled and work, I needed to be doing something that I felt like I would be intimately tied with a person and not have the work be like doing something that would help someone down the road, but kind of be working one-on-one with people.”

Similarly, Payton was interested in understanding the inner workings of people and enjoys listening and hearing other people's stories. She also saw the benefit after her "own journey with counseling." Pearl's counselor journey began with her experience, as a member and later as the facilitator, of a support group: "I became a member of the facilitating team…with the support group and then I started the counseling program…a couple of years later." Because of the pandemic, Zoe had the chance to "reflect" on her career path and chose to become a counselor because of love of communication and her "vested interest in the health and success of relationships."

Numerous co-researchers considered their faith to be an important part of their lives and were able to articulate how their Christian identity informs their views as a counselor. For Chelsea, her faith has enhanced her counseling ability:

> I think it's made me a better counselor even in a secular setting because I think it comes down to your worldview. Like at the end of the day, no matter what someone else in front of me believes, regardless of who or what they believe in, or what they don't believe in, the way I see them, or the way I try to see them, to be very, very clear is that they are created in the image of God, that they're loved by God, that my Jesus died on the cross for this person, even if they don't realize it.. That I have a God who loves them so deeply and that I have the opportunity to love on them and it helps. My faith reminds me that I am just as messed up as anyone else sitting in front of me, that I am just as broken and I have the opportunity to love on this person because God loves them."

Like Chelsea, Jeffrey's Christian identity allowed him to see "Christ in the other person" and to give them "the benefit of the doubt" because he's not perfect. Jane described applying the concept of free will to her counseling work, remembering that God gives people a choice and

"we can choose to do that or not." Monica's Christian identity prompted her to be open-minded and being self-aware, authentic, and non-judgmental in her work as a counselor. Similarly, Payton's faith spurred her commitment to acceptance, love, and openness to others.

Mark described gravitating towards the "motif of love…throughout the Bible" which he considers to be "beautiful." Similarly to Chelsea, Mark allowed "the idea of the image of God" to shape his counseling identity and believed that "there is kind of an inherent godliness or 'godness' in everyone that kind of demands respect and demands dignity, I think is really powerful." When considering how her Christian identity influenced her views as a counselor, Amy revealed that "if anything…it has taught me to love people well."

Values and Values Imposition

All the co-researchers were able to identify ways that counseling values and Christian values both overlap and diverge. Love, empathy, grace, acceptance, non-judgment, care, listening, patience, justice, and respect were frequently mentioned as similar values. Chelsea emphasized that "there are a lot of inherently wonderful things about being a conservative Christian that meshes well with the counseling vocation that does not get highlighted." Mark noted that "...in many ways Christians have been doing counseling for a long time, whether that's pastoral through priests, people coming for wisdom, coming to help their hurts…there is a lot of crossover in that."

Pearl and Zoe both identified the goal of healing as a similarity. For Zoe, "something that…speaks to [her] as a clinician and…Christian is being able to journey with people through some of the hardest moments in their life and to show up for them in a way that they can receive healing." The ability to sit with people in their suffering was an overlapping value that both Jeffrey and Pearl shared. Jeffrey believes that counselors should not "shy away from the

suffering of other people…we should face it head on." Similarly, Pearl felt that part of loving others is "being able to take on other people's suffering and being there for them in that time of pain."

Zoe and Jeffrey mentioned relationships as a similar value, albeit in different ways. "The power of relationships" is something that Zoe thought was similar in both counseling and Christianity:

> Whether it's your relationship with God, your relationship with your brothers and sisters, and even like your relationship with…the world. And I also think…counseling…speaks to that…a lot of the work that we do is with relationships - the relationship with yourself, the relationship with other people, the relationship with social media and culture. Those all have a way of shaping and influencing who we become, and so, being able to reflect and take an assessment of your relationship and…adjust accordingly. There's wisdom in that, that the Bible talks about….and I think counseling affirms that.

Taking a slightly different approach, Jeffrey spoke to the connected value of remediation: "Christ asks for penance. There's recompense…there needs to be something done to remediate if there's been…a rupture or sin. It's the same thing in the counseling relationship - you can't move on from a rupture without there being a repair."

In contrast, nine of the co-researchers described ways that the values of the counseling profession differed from Christian values. Monica brought up how Christian values do not always align with the counseling value of non-maleficence:

> I feel like in that aspect, avoiding…harm, they don't do so much avoiding. If it's something they believe in….and you're doing something that they feel...is going against

> those values, they're definitely willing to cause some harm, whether it's emotionally or whatever…religion comes first.

Another divergent value that came up was the non-directive nature of counseling and how it can be challenging for counselors to take a passive stance with clients. Chelsea named "leading someone to their own conclusion versus calling something for what you see it" as a divergent value. Jasmine confirmed the difficulty of taking a less directive approach: "when people are indulging in things that can be harmful, whether it's sin or not, sometimes it's hard to just sit by and just allow them to process." Zoe also noted the difference of having "to bracket your values if it clashes…with the person that you're speaking to." Along the same lines, Mark spoke to the difference between the goal of a counselor and the goal of a pastor:

> I think that Christianity does talk about good and bad, or good and wrong. But I think that that might be the separating bar from a Christian counselor or a pastor and a counselor. I think that the job of a counselor is to help people become healthy aside from what they think is right and wrong or what the counselor thinks is right and wrong. And then a pastor is trying to help a person become good or help them become in right standing with God. And that's not really what the counselor is trying to do."

Jeffrey shared his thoughts about the counseling value of multiculturalism and how it is contrary to the Christian value of unity:

> It's that these boundaries…that we want to use to identify ourselves, which…are salient and…important for us, in Christ …the divisions cease in the sense that the things that make us battle and fight against one another or that pit us against one another as oppressor and oppressed, in Christ and in the Christian vision…those divisions cease. But I think anytime that multiculturalism, or especially…intersectionality, goes into a frame

of reference of these people should be preferenced over others because they are oppressed on XYZ variables I think that's just very dangerous thinking.

When examining the relationship between counseling values and Christian values, it is important to consider how those values can impact the therapeutic process. Several co-researchers referenced values imposition and bracketing during their interviews. The consensus is that it is necessary for counselors to bracket their values and avoid imposing those values onto clients. Though it seems simple in theory, Monica expressed doubt around the efficacy of bracketing religious values: "I feel like [with] religion…it would be hard for people to leave their own identities out of the process because it's so innate in us." Amy disclosed that she is trying to be more aware of her biases and value conflicts so she can "provide that safe place for people regardless of the sexual orientation or gender…identity." In Mark's program, conversations about the potential for values imposition were anxiety-provoking: "There was a lot of warning against value imposition… the first year in particular, I feel like [I]was so cautious that I was almost worried to talk about my values [or] let my values show at all." Chelsea understood the importance of bracketing one's values but encouraged counselors to not overlook "the values that come with being a Christian when it comes to being in the counseling space."

Personal and Professional Integration

The developmental journey of counselors includes the reconciliation of professional identity with personal identity, which is comprised of many cultural facets including spirituality and religion. Training programs can provide a space for counseling students to begin the integration process. How co-researchers were balancing both their personal values and the values of the counseling profession was revealed through their feelings about spiritual/religious

integration with clients and their advice for future counseling students with conservative Christian values.

Many of the co-researchers were open to integrating spirituality and religion in their clinical work and agreed that it should be client-led. Initially Jasmine was reluctant to "do Christian counseling" because she did not want to be restricted, however she concluded that "Christian counseling is still happening" because she is a Christian and warmed up to the idea of integration. At the time of this study, Amy had only one client that identified as Christian and they had not spoken about spirituality/religion, but Amy was "still figuring it out" because she never really wanted to identify…as a Christian therapist but as a therapist who is Christian."

Chelsea, who had already entered the counseling field, shared that she enjoys being able to talk more transparently, when working with clients who identify as Christian: "it goes back to language just even just being able to say things like, oh, praise God like that's great or like, how's the Lord meeting you in that? Things that I would not say to a non-Christian." However, Chelsea made it clear that client treatment would be largely the same: "so if it's someone with health anxiety and they have a little bit of OCD the way you treat someone with OCD isn't like let's pray about it. Like we might pray about it but like there's also like legitimate work that we do."

When thinking about spiritual/religious integration, Monica expressed concern about clients who may have experienced religious trauma: "I've had some clients where…their spirituality and…religion has caused conflict and it's almost like they're trying to escape it and like create their own life. So…I don't know. I feel indifferent about it." Payton was also worried about offending her client: "you bring yourself into your counseling sessions and so that's going to be there, whether I want it to or not, just like my values in general. But…I don't want it to be

the reason that a client doesn't seek help because their counselor is a Christian and they have church hurt and they think I'm gonna judge them."

When asked what advice they had for future counseling students with conservative Christian values, the responses of many of the co-researchers provided insight about the path to personal and professional integration. Payton and Monica encouraged conservative students to embrace their values which aligned with Jeffrey's admonishment "to remember that you have something that people are seeking…so… trust in what you believe as being able to be expressed through your work as a counselor." Chelsea also invited future students to consider "that the values that you learn in your faith are part of what makes you a good therapist." Mark suggested that Christian counselors might struggle with personal and professional integration because "the world or Christianity kind of puts people in a box and says that you have to choose one or the other. You have to choose to be Christian counselor. You have to choose to be a secular counselor. And I…think that…it's a false dichotomy…I think that there's ways that you can kind of traverse that."

As they navigate their personal and professional identities, Zoe encouraged counseling students with conservative Christian values to be committed to growth and to find opportunities to explore their interests outside of their programs: "if you really care about it, you will find a way to nurture it." Zoe also suggested that students "find like-minded individuals to process with …especially in a program that feels like very liberal." Jane had a similar recommendation: "get involved in…a faith centered community. Whether it's like a virtual community, or…a local church and small group, or it's some fellowship to be able to walk along with them, share what they're going through and point out things, convict them if needed." Amy's final advice was "be

open…don't assume that you know everything. Be open to be wrong. Be open to see your biases. …It's gonna hurt. It's gonna be painful. But you'll be so much a better person for it."

Diverse Training Experiences

The co-researchers represented six distinct institutions located in the southern United States. However, institutional affiliation is simply one facet of how students perceive their training program. Similar to counseling practice, counselor training encompasses both intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics, ensuring the uniqueness of each student's education. The nature of these diverse training experiences was conveyed through four themes: Program Characteristics, Psychological Safety, Community and Support, and Training Experience.

Program Characteristics

The type of counselor training program, secular or religious, can have a significant impact on the student experience. Three of the co-researchers identified the characteristics that affected their program selection. Jeffrey's selection of a secular program over a religious program was financially motivated: "my main [for] doing a secular program was cost." Amy considered attending a Christian program but felt it was "constraining" and meant that she "could only counsel certain types of people" so she decided on a secular program because she "wanted to be able to provide space regardless of…their religious background." Jane also was "divided on…going to a secular program or going into a Christian program." After sitting in on a lecture about spiritual development at her university, she determined that she could "still get value and spirituality" from a secular program. Pearl did not disclose why she chose her secular program, but she advised future students with conservative Christian values to "be clear about what type of counseling you want to do…because…if you're a conservative Christian…you may want to find a program that aligns with those values."

When speaking generally about their counselor training program, seven co-researchers reported a range of experiences. Both Payton and Amy noted good experiences with Amy stating "I love it" and Payton referring to her experience as "positive." Jeffrey described his experience as slightly above average: "...I'm thinking of a Likert scale…it's like slightly above the middle." Jane referred to her experience as "mixed" and noted that there have been "good things about it" and "a couple things [that] have been kind of rough." Chelsea felt that her program was "very transactionary" and expressed feeling like "a number in a seat" with a "paycheck" above her name and "frustration" around the "missed opportunity to have received an education that would have been on par" with what she wanted as a student.

After being asked about their overall training experience, Monica, Pearl and Zoe expressed an appreciation for the breadth of knowledge that they gained from their programs. Zoe felt that the application of that knowledge was not clearly addressed, but she found support through supervision and other connections outside of the classroom:

> I think [the program] was very good in providing knowledge…like why are we doing what we're doing and the purpose behind it. It struggled a little bit in the application department, in terms of like training, the actual skills to do counseling…but with my internship experiences and in supervision and being able to talk to professors about their work and other…doc students and other colleagues about their work, I was able to get a pretty good idea.

Psychological Safety

All ten of the co-researchers spoke to feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and experiences related to their Christian identity that may have affected their sense of psychological safety in their program. During her first semester, Chelsea considered dropping out of her program:

> I seriously contemplated dropping out because…of this strong push that felt very directed towards Christians of you need to bracket your values. You need to bracket your religion; you need to separate. And it felt very non-compassionate and like there wasn't a whole lot of understanding behind this idea of what it means to be a person of faith, regardless of your faith in a secular profession. If I have to choose between my faith in this vocation, I'm going to choose my faith.

Chelsea remained in her program after having dialogue with a professor who told her that what she was experiencing was "because this institution's not faith friendly. It's not that they're hostile towards faith, they're just not faith friendly." There were times that Chelsea felt that her "faith and…training were at odds" and experienced her training as "intentionally challenging when it didn't need to be, and not at all affirming, when affirmation could have been helpful."

It also seems clear that conversations around religion and spirituality tended to be complicated and, at times, nonexistent. Zoe made the point that "people were pretty nervous to talk about their spirituality and their religion in the program…so it wasn't really something that was spoken about." Payton felt that her opinion would be heard but did not always "feel like there's a space for a different opinion." Jane too felt like some students were unable to openly express their opinions: "…when we got to like religion topics…there's a couple of other conservative Christians in the group…we all felt like we…had to listen instead of being able to share or if someone did share, then it wasn't…reciprocated very well." This seems to align with Zoe's report that "people who did have a lot of…the outside signals that they cared about God…weren't looked upon favorably." However, Zoe suggests that this "wasn't because of their beliefs but just the way that they showed up, the way that they expressed their beliefs." In addition to the inability to share freely, Jane also recalled "comments…against conservative

Christian values, or like, just like against faith-based counseling in general…and a lot of misconceptions about like how it's done."

In addition to engaging with peers, interactions with faculty also influenced co-researchers' experiences with psychological safety. Jasmine shared a challenging exchange with one of her professors:

> So, in couples counseling one day…he started talking about Jesus derogatory, you know, just negatively. And it kind of came out of nowhere…and then he's like 'well, you know, Jesus wasn't anything special,' just totally left field. He's like 'you know, he was just a magi, he wasn't the savior of the world,' like all this stuff. And I was sitting there like huh? No one has brought up Jesus. No one has brought [up] religion of any kind. …And being that I love apologetics, I was like, no, we're not doing this. We are not doing this. And it went on and I just remember like my blood pressure getting high, and I was starting to get angry, and I was like 'God, please help.'

Feeling accepted by colleagues and professors can influence an individual's sense of psychological safety. Several co-researchers described concerns about how their classmates would respond to their conservative Christian identity. Payton does not hide her identity from her cohort members but admits that she does not feel that is a part of her identity that is "accepted." Amy was more concerned that her colleagues would judge her because of her Christian identity:

> Especially in the beginning…I would say that I was a Christian, but I wouldn't really go past that because I was worried that I was going to be judged for being a conservative Christian…that I'm too judgmental. And so…there was another one of my classmates who is…a devout Catholic and he was very vocal about his faith, and I found myself like kind of pulling away from him because I didn't want to be associated.

Jeffrey had a similar experience in his program: "…it's funny…I'm almost more concerned about being outed as a Christian than as a gay man."

Adding to the fear of not being accepted, there were consistent messages among the co-researchers about fear of offending people. Payton felt that "I wanna be who I am, but I don't wanna offend anybody" and Jeffrey worried that if he "really shared [his] belief about being pro-life, or someone might say, anti-abortion…depending on how you frame it…a lot of people would be really upset by it." Zoe acknowledged that fear of offending others impacted what she addressed: "when I think about my grad school experiences, those were the type of conversations in which I treaded very carefully because…the expectation is that you bracket it and then don't say something that would be hurtful."

The feeling of fear extended beyond offending others. Some co-researchers expressed concern over how their conservative Christian values might affect their evaluation and standing in the program. In reflecting on his experience in his counselor training program, Mark confirmed these fears:

> It made me nervous to talk about my Christianity because I was in a new environment. I was wanting to have the positive opinion of others. You know I wanted to make good relations with my supervisors and with my professors and I didn't want the negative perception of Christians, which I think can sometimes be warranted of a certain type of Christianity, to affect my standing in my academics.

Jeffrey also had concerns about how faculty would interpret his religious views:

> There's even some part of me that thinks 'I know that I'm being rated in every single class that I'm in by the professors' in terms of my ability to be a good counselor. And if a particular professor's views are…particularly progressive socially, I can't see how they're

> gonna be able to separate that. I mean, I know my professors are competent and will do their best, but we all have bias that we don't realize. And so I'm just very careful about my perception, because I know I'm being graded.

The behavior of the co-researchers was influenced by these feelings and experiences, specifically their engagement in the classroom and their transparency and openness with others. Mark admitted that he struggled to show up authentically: "I definitely felt like I was shielding some of [my Christian identity]…and part of that might have been the environment of the counseling setting." In addition to bracketing her Christian values academically and clinically, Zoe also learned to "chameleon very well." After her first year, Amy began talking more about her faith but still has this "reservation of…I have to believe like everyone else…in order to truly fit in."

As it related to classroom engagement, both Monica and Mark describe being reticent. Monica described herself as a "fly on the wall" – "I just kinda sit in class and I'm super quiet." Mark shared that he "stayed quiet and did not bring things up that came to…mind if it was related to Christianity or related to things that Christianity…has thoughts about." Jeffrey took a more moderate approach:

> I most of the time err on the side of not incorporating [my religion or faith] into my responses in an explicit way in class…often it's implicit. I'll bring it through implicitly. …Often…I'm not gonna talk. I don't think it's worth it. I think that it'll cause me more harm than good.

Monica highlighted that "spirituality and religion can definitely be one of those conversations where [people's] ideas and beliefs and their strong feelings about it can definitely cause…conversation that's not fun to have." Zoe also recognized the difficulty of engaging in

discourse about spirituality/religion after "a conversation with someone who also had conservative Christian values about how uncomfortable they felt like being able to speak it out…in a more public setting."

Community and Support

Several co-researchers addressed the sense of community and support in their programs, with some feeling supported and others not experiencing much community. Jane and Payton, who both attended a cohort-based program, described feeling supported in their cohorts. Though there are dissenting opinions around controversial topics, Jane's cohort has "gotten along really well" and managed disagreements that may have been more challenging for other cohorts. Payton also felt fortunate about her cohort dynamic: "My cohort is wonderful…we're very lucky to get along [so] well."

Jasmine was enrolled in a non-cohort program but has had similar experiences as Jane and Payton and that community and support became very evident after a challenging classroom discussion:

> The thing I loved about the program is that even though all of us was different, all the other students knew that I was a Christian, they knew that that meant something to me. And so, they were all in the group chat texting me, 'are you okay?' 'Do we need to step out?' …I definitely feel supported by my peers.

Jeffrey was also enrolled in a non-cohort program but has had a slightly different experience than Jasmine, described the atmosphere in his program as "congenial" and having "some good acquaintances in the program" but not being "involved in the life of the campus" and not having "a lot of strong friendships with people in the program."

The conversation around support was not limited to interactions with colleagues. Amy expressed a deep appreciation for her faculty and how "they walk the walk [and] they obviously care for their students." On the other hand, Zoe shared disappointment with her professors and their behavior: "how professors…behave that was a little appalling. [That] counseling professors could be so incongruent with what they taught - that was really disturbing to me." Chelsea grew up in the area where her program was located and had established social supports, however she identified a lack of support from faculty:

> I felt a general level of apathy within my program on behalf of the faculty and then a level of like trying so hard to keep the head above the water for others. So, like half the faculty was two feet out the door, unless [they're] like trying to turn the lights off on their way out. Whereas the other half were desperately trying to keep their head up.

Payton reported a positive experience with a faculty member that affected her training experience. She highlighted a specific professor from her multicultural class who shared a similar background having been raised in a conservative Catholic household: "I would say that [she] has really like made the experience more positive overall, because I felt like I could relate to her because we had a lot of the same views growing up. And I felt like I could talk to her and be really honest about those things." According to Jeffrey, there were not a lot of professors in his program with a "salient" Christian identity and so there is no one for him to talk to about his Christian identity and what that might mean for counseling.

Training Experience

Co-researchers described diverse experiences in their training programs, highlighting the ways that formal learning, informal learning, supervision, field placement, and pedagogical approaches impacted their training. Co-researchers indicated that formal learning (e.g., structured

classroom experiences) focused on spirituality and religion was uncommon. Eight of the co-researchers noted there was very little discussion around spirituality around religion beyond their multicultural course. Zoe described formal spiritual/religious discourse as "few and far between" and Jasmine pointed out that the content in multicultural class "really didn't talk about faith and spirituality much…they mainly talked about ethnicity and race." Jeffrey summarized his experience in this way:

> I will say, I think Christianity very much gets glossed over…it's like there are very few conversations I've had directly about my experience as a Christian. There's been pretty few conversations or course material that has solicited responses from students regarding…specifically, their religious or spiritual orientation. I think often the conversation, even in lecture, revolves much more frequently around race or ethnicity. …So, spirituality in some sense seems like…it can kind of be an afterthought. …In counseling theories, you go a little bit into discussions of spirituality, but I didn't feel like I ever had anything to really contribute to that. Not because…I don't have strong beliefs, but just because I didn't think the teachers made it relevant. It's just there's a lack of discussion. It's not even that there's vitriolic discussion or discussion that's critical, although I do see that sometimes.

Despite limited opportunities for formal learning, informal learning and exploring the topics of spirituality and religion outside of structured classroom activities seemed to be helpful for some of the co-researchers. Chelsea explored the intersection of her Christian and counselor identities "within private conversations with other therapists who are in the industry, or friends who also identified as people with faith within my program." Zoe recalled a fruitful dialogue with colleagues after a classroom activity: "we had a discussion question about how people

understood their sexuality and their sexual like behavior and a lot of the times that's influenced by religion…I had really good conversation with my colleagues about it…" Amy was able to examine her bias towards the LGBTQ+ community through conversations with other members of her cohort who also grew up Christian.

Additionally, engagement with faculty was not limited to formal learning. Chelsea sought the advice of an adjunct professor when she was struggling with her program's approach to spirituality and religion:

> And it was actually talking to an adjunct professor towards the end of my first semester…and I just like asked them one day, I'm like is it possible to be a Christian and to be a therapist? Because I feel like [the program] is like really going out of their way to make me think that the two don't exist.

Amy was confident that she could connect with faculty outside of the classroom to address spiritual/religious issues:

> I know that I can go to any one of them and present them a problem and they will sit down and help me figure it out or…if I'm struggling with something they'll like, sit and they'll listen. …Also, I've had conversations, one on one, conversations with professors about how to integrate my faith with my counseling skills.

Supervision and field experience (i.e., practicum and internship) also were identified as influential parts of the training process. Chelsea and Zoe described positive experiences with their supervisors, and Zoe noted that supervision and internship helped her develop her counseling skills. Jane shared that she has had "a lot of like casual conversations about…how to apply things." Jane also valued the atmosphere at her field placement: "my practicum site is also my internship site. They're technically not faith-based but most of the therapists and residents

there do practice faith-based and…when in the office like a lot of like scripture jokes and Christian jokes…"

Not all of the experiences in supervision were positive. Pearl felt uncomfortable sharing her Christian views in supervision:

> During group supervision, there are certain things that I was seeing with clients and you know I would....be like 'oh, I think they need Jesus…that's what I think they need.' But you know…I didn't feel like I could say that in supervision. …So, like I had, you know, one or two…conversations like that where I say something that makes sense to me and then it's silence. So, I'm like, okay…maybe this is not the place.

Four of the co-researchers shared about lectures, discussions, or coursework that were difficult to navigate for students with conservative Christian values. Jane described a recent experience with a challenging assignment: "I've had kind of a struggle with an assignment that really conflicts with my values and having to get an alternative worked out with the professor and with my church and the professor hasn't been very open with it." Chelsea expressed frustration with the case examples that were used in her program:

> There are a lot of case demonstrations that felt really morally complicated that they would use as a very black and white scenario. And that really challenged me and made me wonder if one could be a Christian in this industry just based off the case examples they used. …I identify as a Christian, so I look at it through a Christian world lens. But truly any religion, these examples would be contentious. It would have been a hard thing.

Jasmine named two classroom experiences that felt especially challenging. The first was "a video of this woman who said she wouldn't counsel gay people, and she got kicked out of the program." The intended goal was to emphasize "you can't be discriminative, you can't be biased"

however “the class conversation turns into this kind of, not necessarily Christian hating session, but this whole thing of you know how can she throw the first stone? How can she be so critical?” The second interaction involved using language to match the client. Here is how Jasmine recounted the experience:

> This one lady gave an example like…if your client cusses in a session then that also gives you permission to cuss as well, if you feel like you need to or to match the client. And she was like ‘well [Jasmine] would you cuss?’ And I said, well, I don't cuss so…and she was like ‘well what if that would make the client feel some kind of way?’ And I was like, well I can't help that, but I did crack under pressure, unfortunately, and I hate that. So, she asked for example, cause she was like ‘well, say if she says B, you know, say the word.’ I was like okay, well, ‘B’, but I didn't say the word, just said the letter B. She was like ‘no, no, say the word’ - this is the professor – ‘say the word, say the word.’ And I said the word but like in my head what I was thinking a word…shouldn't be an obstacle to get to meeting this person where they are. However, when I walked away, I was convicted…because I'm like you don't change for anything or anybody…”

Zoe recalled a controversial guest lecture given by a graduate of their program who specializes in sex counseling for the LGBTQ+ community:

> There were some complaints about it because of the way that she spoke about religion, and sexuality. And she…implied that they could be at odds a lot of the time and because of that religion was almost something you had to overcome in order to have like good sex. And so…the way that she delivered that message did not land well with people.

Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the categories and themes that emerged from interviews with 10 co-researchers who are counseling graduate students that identify as holding conservative Christian values. After examining the data collected, I identified three categories and 10 themes which were shared in the chapter. In Chapter Five, I will discuss the research findings, implications, limitations, personal reflections, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

In this study, I aimed to investigate how counseling graduate students who hold conservative Christian values perceive their spiritual and religious identities, and how these perceptions shape their encounters within secular counseling training programs. The findings from this study add to the existing body of literature on the experiences of religiously conservative students in secular environments. To gain understanding of these experiences, I recruited 10 co-researchers and collected data through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed three overarching categories and 10 themes that were presented in Chapter Four. This chapter focuses on a discussion of the research findings in relationship to the research questions, highlights the implications of the study, identifies the limitations of the study, and provides recommendations for future research. It also includes my personal reflections about the research process.

Discussion of Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how graduate counseling students with conservative Christian values understand their spiritual and religious identities, and how this influences their experiences within secular counseling training programs. There is existing research investigating the experiences of conservative Christian students at secular universities, the experiences of counseling graduate students within Christian institutions, and the experiences of conservative Christian students attending secular accredited counseling and counseling psychology programs (Hyers & Hyers, 2008; Schaefer, 2006; Spies, 2020). To date, however, researchers have not focused specifically on the experiences of graduate counseling students with conservative Christian values who attended secular, CACREP-accredited training programs.

This inquiry was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of counseling students with conservative Christian values in secular counselor training programs?
2. How do counseling students with conservative Christian values make sense of their spiritual/religious identity?

The following section calls attention to the essential themes that emerged from interviews with 10 counseling graduate students with conservative Christian values. The themes of Social Influences, Christian Identity, Christian Conservatism, Influence of Christian Identity, Values and Values Imposition, Personal and Professional Integration, Program Characteristics, Psychological Safety, Community and Support, and Training Experience will be presented based on their connection to each research question.

Research Question One

What are the lived experiences of counseling students with conservative Christian values in secular counselor training programs?

The present study uncovered seven themes related to the first research question: Psychological Safety, Influence of Christian Identity, Values and Values Imposition, Community and Support, Training Experience, Program Characteristics and Personal and Professional Integration. The following section examines each theme in relation to existing research.

Psychological Safety

The findings illustrate that the co-researchers experienced varying degrees of psychological safety in their counseling programs. In other studies, students have described concealing their religious/spiritual identity to avoid judgment or unacceptance (Giordano et al., 2018; Hunt, 2019). Co-researchers felt a reluctance to openly discuss their spirituality or

conservative Christian beliefs due to concerns about acceptance and fear of judgment from both peers and faculty. Often, religiously conservative students encounter peers and faculty who harbor negative perceptions of Christians (Schaefer, 2006). Several co-researchers recounted uncomfortable instances that they perceived as insensitivity towards their beliefs. Despite varying levels of support and community within their programs, co-researchers expressed mixed feelings about the inclusivity and understanding of their Christian identities, highlighting both supportive interactions and experiences of disconnection and marginalization. This is consistent with research that cites a lack of psychological safety and appreciation of difference in counselor training programs (Giordano et al., 2018). While creating psychological safety is paramount, it also must be balanced against the gatekeeping responsibilities that faculty hold (Klemashevich, 2021). For example, while faculty must support diversity of beliefs, they must also hold this in tension against ethical standards of the counseling profession. For example, it is one thing for a student to share in class that they hold a particular belief; it is quite another for them to say that they will systematically discriminate against a group of people or behave in other ways that might violate the ACA Code of Ethics.

Influence of Christian Identity

Spirituality and religion have a profound influence on our worldview, with many theories noting this as a developmental process that evolves across the lifespan (Gill & Freund, 2018). Many of the co-researchers believed their Christian faith to be an integral part of their counselor identity and articulated how their faith enriches their professional practice. The co-researchers emphasized the importance of values like love, empathy, and acceptance, which they believe are rooted in their Christian worldview. Researchers indicate that value-neutrality in counseling is unrealistic, prompting clinicians to focus on understanding how their values contribute to the

therapeutic process (Bayne et al., 2020; Bergin et al., 1996; Kocet & Herlihy, 2014). The co-researchers described their Christian values informing their clinical work in several ways: allowing their faith to guide their perception of clients, applying Christian principles like free will and being non-judgmentalism in their counseling, and integrating Christian values like love and respect into their counseling approaches. These insights underscore how faith can profoundly shape counselors' perspectives and practices, potentially fostering supportive and compassionate therapeutic relationships.

Values and Values Imposition

The findings indicate that there is a significant overlap between counseling values and Christian values among the co-researchers who identified common themes such as love, empathy, grace, acceptance, non-judgment, care, listening, patience, justice, and respect as integral to both their personal and professional identities. The ways in which religious beliefs and values can enhance professional identity and support counselors in their clinical practice are often overlooked; the standards embraced by religious counselors can, at times, exceed those set by secular counselors (Avent Harris et al., 2017; Klemashevich, 2021). Several co-researchers emphasized the natural compatibility between Christian beliefs and the counseling profession, noting that principles of healing and journeying with individuals through difficulty are fundamental to both. Additionally, relationships were recognized as a fundamental value, considering the importance of relational dynamics in both spiritual and therapeutic contexts.

The co-researchers also named concerns about values imposition and the process of bracketing. Though researchers identify tools like ethical bracketing and the Counselor Values-Based Conflict Model (CVCM) as ways to mediate value conflicts (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014), the co-researchers expressed that bracketing one’s values may be more aspirational than achievable.

These developments highlight the critical intersection of faith and professional practice in the experiences of the co-researchers.

Community and Support

The co-researchers described varied experiences of community and support in their counseling programs. Some co-researchers enrolled in cohort-based programs expressed feeling well-supported within their cohorts. Rather than becoming divisive, disagreements were handled constructively, leading to cohesion within the group. Despite being in a non-cohort program, one co-researcher still felt supported by peers who recognized and respected their Christian identity, providing emotional support during challenging moments. In contrast, another co-researcher, who was also in a non-cohort program, described a congenial atmosphere but lacked strong personal connections with other students in the program.

Christian students tend to seek support and supervision from other Christians, believing that non-Christians might struggle to understand their experiences (Abbey & Gubi, 2022). There were mixed perceptions of faculty support, with one co-researcher expressing appreciation for supportive and caring faculty, contrasting with another co-researcher's disappointment in the incongruent behavior of faculty. Similarly, a co-researcher found connection with a professor who shared a similar background, which enhanced their overall program experience, whereas another co-researcher felt that there were few faculty members with whom they could discuss their Christian identity and its implications for counseling. Overall, these experiences highlight the importance of both peer and faculty support in shaping counselor training experiences.

Training Experience

The findings revealed that formal education (e.g., lectures, coursework, classroom discussions) on spirituality and religion was sparse in the co-researchers' training programs. Only

occasional discussions occurred outside of multicultural courses and the integration of spiritual or religious topics into curriculum was uncommon. Extant literature indicates that current counselor training on spirituality and religion is insufficient, leaving counselors feeling ill-equipped to effectively address spirituality and religion in their counseling practice (Henriksen et al., 2015).

Co-researchers expressed a sense that spirituality and religion, including Christianity, was overlooked in their programs, with few opportunities for meaningful dialogue or exploration of religious identity. Despite sporadic mentions, co-researchers generally felt that spirituality and religion were not given sufficient attention. This is consistent with reports that counselors recognize the importance of multicultural courses in their professional growth, but stress that a single course is inadequate and advocate for coursework focused on spiritual and religious content (Avent Harris et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2019).

Several co-researchers reported that informal learning and engagement with spirituality and religion outside of structured classroom activities played an important role in their training programs. Co-researchers found conversations with fellow counselors and friends with a similar faith background, meaningful discussions with colleagues, and informal dialogue with faculty who were approachable and willing to discuss spiritual/religious matters to be helpful. These informal interactions highlight the value of engaging with spiritual/religious content beyond the classroom.

Program Characteristics

The characteristics of the counselor training program influenced student experience. Co-researchers noted the impact of choosing a secular institution over a religious one, citing concerns about the limitations that a Christian program might have on counseling practice. This

was in sharp contrast with a co-researcher who advised conservative Christian students to select a program that aligns with their values. Conservative Christian students may find comfort in a program with similar values; however, students could benefit from engaging with peers with different perspectives who challenge them to critically reflect on their own views (Wallace, 2017). The co-researchers reported varied experiences within their programs in general; some described positive experiences, one rated their experience as slightly above average, while others had a mixed experience with both positive and negative aspects. Despite assorted opinions about their overall programs, several co-researchers appreciated the knowledge they gained, even if there were deficiencies around practical application.

Personal and Professional Integration

Counselors often navigate the challenge of reconciling their professional and personal identities, specifically around spirituality and religion. Training programs are typically part of the initial phase of this integration process, providing guidance as counselors-in-training move through the transformational tasks of professional identity development (Gibson et al., 2010). The co-researchers shared their thoughts about navigating their personal and professional identities, particularly regarding spiritual and religious integration in clinical work. Many co-researchers were open to incorporating spirituality and religion into their practice if it was client-led. Others preferred a more cautious approach because of concerns about the potential for religious trauma and the difficulty they may have in balancing their personal beliefs with professional practice.

For future counseling students with conservative Christian values, co-researchers advised embracing their values and integrating them into their work while remaining open to learning and growth. They suggested seeking supportive communities, both inside and outside of their

programs, and remaining open to self-reflection and personal development which speaks to the importance of lifelong learning and sense of professional community as part of professional counselor identity development (Gibson et al., 2010).

Research Question Two

How do counseling students with conservative Christian values make sense of their spiritual/religious identity?

This study revealed three themes connected to the second research question: Social Influences, Christian Identity, and Christian Conservatism. The following section examines each theme in relation to existing research.

Social Influences

Numerous co-researchers stressed the role of social influences in shaping their Christian identities. Researchers suggest that social influence (e.g., parents, peers) has a notable effect on religious commitment (Ozorak, 1989). Social influence that informed the Christian identities of the co-researchers came through family, church associations, mentors, friendships, and other relationships. The findings highlight the significant role of religious upbringing in shaping the Christian identities of the co-researchers. Nine out of the ten co-researchers grew up immersed in church environments, with family members who were actively involved in ministry roles.

The co-researchers represented a variety of Christian denominations during their formative years and many of them highlighted their active involvement in church activities from a young age. Scholars posit that this early socialization has a more significant impact on adult religiosity than other elements of life (Sherkat, 1998). Some co-researchers credited their parents for instilling Christian values early on, shaping their religious identities. This aligns with research that identifies parent religion as the most influential factor in religious transmission

(Regnerus, 2003). In contrast, one co-researcher had a less stringent religious upbringing, allowing them to develop their faith independently. Overall, these accounts draw attention to the diverse ways in which early religious experiences can influence religious development. These findings also illustrate how social connections play a pivotal role in fostering and developing the Christian identities of the co-researchers.

Christian Identity

The findings illustrate that despite diverse cultural backgrounds, all co-researchers recognized the profound impact of their Christian identity on various aspects of their lives. The impact of spiritual/religious identity on behavior and worldview has been well-documented in the literature (Jones, 2019; Nelson, 2009; Pargament, 2007). Co-researchers described how their faith informs their approach to challenges, their decision-making process, and their interactions with others. These narratives underscored the vital role of Christian faith in shaping the co-researchers' worldview.

Christian Conservatism

The co-researchers hold a wide range of beliefs and values highlighting the diversity within the Christian faith. While some co-researchers explicitly identify as conservative, others feel labeled as such by others despite not fully aligning with conservative viewpoints. Allport and Ross (1967) suggested that religion exists on a spectrum, spanning from intrinsic orientation to extrinsic orientation. Individuals who possess a more intrinsic orientation tend to incorporate their religious beliefs into their daily lives while those with a more extrinsic orientation do not view their religious beliefs as a primary motivator (Allport & Ross, 1967). The findings confirm that spectrum not only applies to religious orientation but also to religious values, more specifically to Christian conservatism. Key aspects of the co-researchers' conservative Christian

identity included a commitment to biblical authority, obedience to God, and a desire for Christian unity. Co-researchers also identified sociopolitical issues such as abortion, euthanasia, immigration, and LGBTQ+ rights as components of their conservative identity. The co-researchers' responses speak to the significant overlap between political and religious values in America. This convergence has led to more people embracing Christian nationalist views, believing that Christianity should play a significant role in civil society in the United States (Perry et al., 2022). Many co-researchers expressed a mix of conservative and liberal views, reflecting complex personal beliefs that may not neatly align with either political or religious conservatism. Co-researcher narratives suggest that they are navigating a nuanced set of values that do not always conform to traditional conservative Christian perspectives. This confirms the multifaceted nature of Christian conservatism, highlighting the intersection of faith, politics, and personal values that shape the co-researchers' identities.

It seems critical, then, to recognize that students identifying as Christian likely hold a diverse array of beliefs and values. Unfortunately, the prevalence of Christian nationalism portrayed in the media may lead some students and faculty to assume a negative monolithic bias, believing that all students who identify as Christian identify as pro-life, anti-LGBTQIA+, anti-divorce, and the like, and that they will impose these values on the clients they serve. What seems most important is to avoid inventing a monolith of Christians and to focus instead on the ability of the individual student to function within the context of existing competencies on spiritual integration (ASERVIC, 2009) and the ethical standards of the profession (ACA, 2014), which include not imposing counselor values on the client.

Implications

The findings of the current study corroborate existing research on spirituality and religion in counseling while also contributing to the scholarship focused on conservative Christianity. The current study has implications for spirituality and religion generally but also for religious conservatism specifically in counseling practice and counselor education. These implications will be addressed in the following section.

Implications for Counseling Practice

The findings of this study have implications not only for clinical practice involving spirituality and religion in general but also for religiously conservative clients and counselors, specifically. The present study illustrated the significant effect of religious identity on values, worldview, and interpersonal dynamics. Spirituality and religion have a profound cultural influence at both the conscious and subconscious levels (Gill & Freund, 2018), and it is critical that counselors recognize the intricate ways that religious identity can impact client's thoughts and behaviors to provide counseling that is both culturally sensitive and effective. This requires that counselors be well-informed about the benefits and challenges associated with integrating spirituality and religion into clinical practice. Researchers suggest that religion and spirituality can promote psychological well-being, and some clients prefer that counselors integrate religious or spiritual interventions into their sessions (Knox et al., 2005; Post & Wade, 2009). This requires that counselors recognize the importance of spirituality and religion and allow that to inform their clinical practice. While all counselors must avoid imposing values, scholars have emphasized cultural comfort, including comfort with discussions of spirituality, as a vital aspect of effective counseling (Bartholomew et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2018), and counselors with some

religious or spiritual background may be more comfortable with these conversations, though this is an empirical question as yet unexamined.

Values play an important role in the counseling relationship and counselors often can convey their personal values in both subtle and overt ways (Francis & Dugger, 2014), A clinician's personal values can influence their views about the weight of spiritual/religious identity and subsequently, their willingness to integrate spirituality and religion in clinical practice. It is evident that an awareness of personal values and the need to bracket (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014) are critical. It is similarly evident that some counselors in training experience challenges in sufficiently bracketing personal beliefs and values, including those related to religion and spirituality. Unfortunately, however, the beneficial aspects of personal values often are cast aside to avoid imposing values onto clients. There is evidence, however, suggesting that religious beliefs can enhance professional identity and support counselors in their clinical practice (Avent Harris et al., 2017; Klemashevich, 2021). Counselors should be open to how their religious values can enhance the therapeutic process while being mindful of the ways that religious values and biases can be harmful to clients. This awareness can help counselors to navigate value conflicts responsibly and ethically.

The present study also confirms the complexities of conservative Christianity which has implications for counselors and clients that hold those views. Increased religiosity correlates with political conservatism in most major religious groups, including Christianity (Hall et al., 2010), so counselors should be aware of the ways that political and religious identities often overlap. Client values are integral to the counseling process and can surface across different contexts including spirituality which means that clinicians should be able to identify and address experiences that have spiritual significance for clients (Dailey, 2018; Jones, 2021), and respect

whatever religious values the client holds, whether those values are considered liberal or conservative and whether they converge or diverge from those of the counselor. Counselors should explore the client's understanding of their religious values, leading with cultural curiosity despite any prior knowledge they have about the client's spiritual or religious tradition. The findings also indicate that Christian conservatism exists on a spectrum so counselors should avoid making assumptions about a client's religious values based on their denominational or political affiliation. Conversely, counselors with conservative Christian values must respect the spiritual/religious orientation of their clients, even if it conflicts with the counselor's own views. Similarly, in counselor education, it is important that students and faculty recognize the diversity of beliefs and values among those identifying as Christian.

Implications for Counselor Education

One of the more critical implications that arose from the present study is the need to foster psychological safety in secular counselor training programs. Effective learning occurs in environments that cultivate psychological safety, where students can express themselves authentically and feel safe taking interpersonal risks; however, students have expressed concern about sharing their religious/spiritual identity for fear of not being accepted (Giordano et al., 2018), a theme that also emerged in this study. Counselor educators can promote inclusivity by incorporating diverse perspectives in course materials and modeling inclusive behavior by bracketing their own values (Giordano et al., 2018). Moreover, counselor educators should carefully assess their planned assignments, lectures, and class activities to ensure that students with conservative views will be able to engage with the material in a way that encourages their development without causing harm. It is imperative that counselor educators be aware of their own biases and how they show up in the classroom to avoid contributing to the alienation of

conservative students. Religious/spiritual diversity among counseling faculty also impacts the sense of psychological safety so programs should be intentional about recruiting professors with various religious perspectives (Giordano et al., 2018).

In addition to the lack of psychological safety, there are gaps in counselor training in the spiritual/religious domain. Scholars indicate that current counselor training on spirituality and religion is inadequate with little room for counseling students to explore their own spiritual/religious identity let alone how spirituality and religion might affect their clients; this leaves counselors feeling unprepared to effectively address spiritual and religious issues in clinical practice (Henriksen et al, 2015; Magaldi-Dopman, 2014). Accordingly, there is a need for increased opportunities for counselors-in-training to explore their spiritual/religious identity within counselor education programs. By integrating more comprehensive training and coursework focused specifically on spiritual/religious identity, counselors-in-training can gain a better understanding of their own beliefs and values, making them better equipped to address the spiritual/religious needs of their clients. Insufficient training has been identified as a barrier to ethically integrating spirituality and religion (Currier et al., 2023), so in addition to providing counseling students the opportunity to explore their spiritual/religious identity, there is also a need for enhanced training on the integration of spirituality and religion in clinical practice. This includes an intentional focus on how to broach spirituality and religion with clients, techniques for bracketing personal values, and ways to navigate religious value conflicts when they arise.

In the same way, multicultural training should be expanded to include spirituality and religion as a cultural factor along with other commonly addressed cultural identities like race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Ironically, a critical aspect of culturally sensitive counseling is cultural comfort, or the ability to have important conversations with

clients in a relaxed and open manner (Bartholomew et al., 2021). Unfortunately, faculty with discomfort around religious and spiritual topics cannot provide strong training in this regard and, at least in some cases, likely exclude training on religion and spirituality entirely. Accordingly, though spirituality and religion are included within the framework of multiculturalism (CACREP, 2023) they are often overlooked in counselor education, offering limited opportunities for students to examine how spirituality and religion intersect with other cultural factors (Henry & Li, 2022; Magaldi-Dopman, 2014). Multicultural discourse, more specifically spirituality and religion, should extend beyond the required multicultural courses and the impact of spirituality and religion should be consistently incorporated in core curriculum (e.g., ethics, theories, lifespan development). Counseling programs might consider devoting an entire course to spirituality and religion or at minimum offering electives or workshops addressing spiritual/religious issues in counseling.

Along with expanding the curriculum surrounding spirituality and religion because of the cultural significance, counselor educators should also consider the importance of spirituality and religion as an element of social justice. As social justice advocates, counselors are expected to address the systemic factors of power, privilege, and oppression and their impact on clients; this includes acknowledging the ways that spirituality and religion can affect marginalized individuals in both healthy and unhealthy ways (Mintert et al., 2020). Several social justice movements were spearheaded by faith-based organizations and their leaders (Albanese, 2005; Allitt, 2003), highlighting the commitment of many religious institutions to address social issues. Given the potential benefits of enhancing counselors' knowledge, skills, awareness, and social justice advocacy around spirituality and religion, Mintert et al. (2020) recommend that counselor

educators incorporate religion and spirituality into course materials, class discussions, and training experiences.

The findings also called attention to the need for religiously diverse faculty. Several of the co-researchers found having faculty with shared religious values to be helpful. However, students have reported experiencing counseling programs as anti-religious and academia, in general, has been described as liberal leaning with an anti-Christian bias (Abbey & Gubi, 2022; Yancey, 2011). There is little spiritual and religious diversity among counseling faculty, which reinforces the perception that religious diversity may not be prioritized in counseling programs (Giordano et al., 2018). Inadequate faculty representation is a missed opportunity to demonstrate for students how to effectively integrate professional and personal identities. The hiring of new faculty can be a cumbersome and lengthy process, so programs should also consider partnering with local divinity schools, seminaries, and community providers who specialize in spiritual/religious integration.

Another implication that emerged from the findings is the process of religious deconstruction. The co-researchers who had exposure to theological education or worked in congregational ministry implicitly and explicitly identified having to navigate the tension between their personal values and the values and beliefs that they had adopted within the context of their religious community. Despite the common belief that theological education ultimately leads to a loss of faith, seminaries are uniquely positioned to support students through the deconstruction process and present options for reconstruction (Manglos-Weber et al., 2024). The co-researchers who had already began engaging in religious deconstruction seemed farther along in their religious identity development. For example, both Amy and Jeffrey appeared to be in the acceptance status of Veersaamy's (2002) experiential/rational model of religious identity

development, demonstrating the ability to engage with both faith and reason. However, other co-researchers who may not have had many opportunities to explore their religious identity seemed to be in the exploration status. It may be beneficial for religiously conservative students to have spaces where they can process the experience of deconstruction with support from peers and faculty as they continue in their religious identity development.

Limitations

The goal of the present study was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of counseling graduate students with conservative Christian values who attended secular training programs. It is important, however, to consider the findings of this study within the context of the limitations of the study. The varied interpretations of the term *conservative* are a potential limitation in this study. During the interview process, it became evident that some co-researchers aligned *conservative* more closely with their political beliefs than with their religious convictions. This difference in interpretation may have influenced their responses, particularly when discussing conservative values. This highlights the need for unambiguous definitions and clear distinction between political and religious conservatism in future research. Additionally, because political and religious conservatism were potentially conflated in this study, it is possible that responses were grounded more in political than religious ideology, at least for some co-researchers.

Another limitation is the sample of co-researchers that were recruited due to their geographical location and institutional affiliation. All the co-researchers attended training programs at institutions located in the southern region of the United States. Geographical location can have a significant impact on religious orientation because of the influence of cultural norms, historical denominational affiliation, and community customs. Most of the co-

researchers matriculated in the region known as the *Bible Belt* that is characterized by a strong presence of conservative Christian traditions; this likely affects societal values and religious practices in that area. The findings may have been different if the sample contained co-researchers from areas that are more religiously diverse. Although the sample included representation from six different institutions, it is important to note that several of the co-researchers attended the same training program. This shared background could have potentially influenced the study's findings, limiting the exploration of diverse experiences.

Heuristic inquiry, while a valuable method for exploring personal experiences and providing rich descriptions, carries several inherent limitations. Heuristic inquiry focuses on the experiences of the individual co-researchers, making replication challenging. This also limits the generalizability of results beyond the individuals and group being studied. Additionally, the subjectivity involved in the research process makes it more difficult to ensure reliability. Despite these limitations, heuristic inquiry remains valuable for exploring lived experiences and generating new insights.

Recommendations for Future Research

The present study highlighted several opportunities for future research. The findings identified the need for more research on creating psychological safety for counseling students, especially students with atypical values or beliefs. Scholars should explore how cultural, social, and individual differences impact student perceptions of safety and belonging to cultivate environments where all students feel valued and respected, and are able to thrive, both academically and emotionally.

Future research should focus on how intersecting identities impact the training experiences of religiously conservative students. The intersection of spirituality/religion and

sexual/affectional identity was addressed in the findings. However, it is critical to evaluate how intersectionality involving other cultural identities might influence the Christian identity, values, and sense of psychological safety students in counselor training programs. This becomes particularly important with intersecting identities that are marginalized, like race/ethnicity or gender. For example, gender can interact with other factors like race and ethnicity, leading to distinct developmental paths for women (Fukuyama et al., 2014); it is likely that there would be a stark contrast between the experiences of a Black queer woman with conservative Christian values and those of a White straight man with similar values. Additional research on intersectionality might elucidate these divergent experiences allowing for more targeted educational practices.

Another area for future research involves exploring the connection between political conservatism and religious conservatism and the implications for counseling. The findings of this study highlight the complicated relationship between religion and politics; exploring historical and contemporary contexts to understand how these ideologies intersect with each other, and influence client worldview could enhance the existing body of research. Additionally, future researchers might explore the role of demographic factors, such as age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, as well as the impact of societal changes and cultural shifts over time.

The findings bring to light the significant influence of community and support on student experience, particularly students with conservative Christian values. Future research on the differences between cohort and non-cohort programs may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how program structure influences student outcomes and experiences. Researchers could investigate how cohort-based learning environments facilitate peer support and collaboration, compared to non-cohort formats. Examining student perceptions of program

environment and faculty perspectives on teaching effectiveness in these different settings could offer valuable insights into best practices for counselor education programs.

Personal Reflections

As I reflect on this study, I deeply appreciate the honesty, vulnerability, and courage of my co-researchers. As someone who struggled to articulate my own religious values, I am amazed by the ways they have already begun to integrate their personal and professional identities. With the benefit of theological education and years of working in congregational ministry, I felt somewhat prepared to navigate that process. Many of my co-researchers did not have the same advantage, yet they were still able to engage in the meaningful work of reconciling their Christian values with the values of the counseling profession.

As I listened to their stories, I was moved by their compassion for people and their awareness that we each experience brokenness, to varying degrees, and are desperately in need of healing. In doing this research, I was forced to remember my own complicated relationship with religion and how eager I was to put away my Christian values and pick up the values of the counseling profession. Through this study, I was reminded that more than one thing can be true: I can lean into my Christian values while still holding true to my values as a counselor.

One of the hallmarks of heuristic inquiry is creative synthesis, where the researcher shares the essential meanings of the experience using a creative medium (Moustakas, 1985). I was initially unsure how I wanted to approach this, eventually deciding to incorporate co-researcher quotes that resonated with me into this reflection: I am profoundly grateful for this experience and even though it felt "exhausting…[and] made me question why I wanted to do this," I persisted. "Deliverance doesn't always look like avoiding the very painful aspects of what life has to bring," but it has helped knowing that I am not alone in this work. "I very much

felt called…by God" to this research topic and I am glad that I decided to let "God use [me] wherever and with whoever." Even though I have been on this journey for a while, I'm learning "to be okay with the fact that not everybody [has] the same opinion but that [doesn't] make mine less right."

"My faith reminds me that I am just as messed up as anyone else…that I am just as broken, and I have the opportunity to love on [others] because God loves them." "I am who I am, and because I am who I am…at some point they're [going to] see some form of Christ…just because of [me] being an image bearer." I no longer feel "like [I] have to sacrifice [my] Christian values to help people on their journey [to] healthiness." Instead, I will make sure that my "soul [remains] oriented to what is good or what is going to be best for [me] and for other people." I'm just going to keep on loving Jesus, because I know that loving Jesus "has taught me to love people well."

Conclusion

The purpose of this heuristic inquiry was to explore the experiences of conservative Christian counseling graduate students within secular counselor training programs. The findings of this study align with extant literature while also contributing novel insights, identifying ten key themes that elucidate how religiously conservative students navigate their training. These findings underscore the importance of cultivating psychological safety in educational settings and supporting students as they integrate their personal and professional identities. Despite the limitations inherent in this study, this creates opportunities for further research designed to deepen our understanding of the challenges and experiences faced by students with conservative religious values in academic spaces, which can be used to enhance inclusivity and support within counselor training programs.

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Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

1. Age? (Enter 'Prefer not to disclose' if you choose not to respond)

2. What ethnicity would best describe you?
    a. Hispanic/Latine
    b. Not Hispanic/Latine
    c. Prefer not to disclose

3. What race would best describe you?
    a. American Indian/Native American
    b. Asian/Asian American
    c. Black/African American
    d. Multiracial (please specify)
    e. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    f. White/Caucasian
    g. Other (please self-identify)
    h. Prefer not to disclose

4. Gender Identity:
    a. Female
    b. Male
    c. Non-binary
    d. Another gender category (please self-identify)
    e. Prefer not to disclose

5. Sexual/affectional orientation:
    a. Asexual
    b. Bisexual
    c. Gay
    d. Lesbian
    e. Straight or Heterosexual
    f. Questioning
    g. Another orientation (please self-identify)
    h. Prefer not to disclose

6. What Christian affiliation best describes you?
    a. Adventist
    b. Anglican
    c. Baptist
    d. Catholic
    e. Charismatic
    f. Evangelical
    g. Jehovah's Witness
    h. Lutheran
    i. Methodist
    j. Moravian
    k. Mormon/LDS
    l. Orthodox
    m. Pentecostal

n. Quaker
o. Other (please specify)
p. Unaffiliated with any particular Christian denomination or tradition

7. Year in counseling program?
    a. 1st year
    b. 2nd year
    c. 3rd year
    d. 4th year and beyond
    e. Recent graduate *(Graduated in 2023 or 2024)*

8. Did you complete or are you currently enrolled in a graduate-level multicultural counseling course as part of your counseling training program?
    a. Yes
    b. No

9. Are you currently attending or graduated from a:
    a. CACREP accredited program
    b. Non-CACREP accredited program

Appendix B: Modified Multidimensional Religious Ideology Scale (MRIS)

Instructions: All items should be answered using a 7-point Likert-type scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

1. When I read the Bible, I know I'm reading the truth.
2. Although Christianity has developed through history, its underlying truths have never changed.
3. Christianity offers genuine truth for all people.
4. Christianity's most profound teachings are clear and easy to understand.
5. The teachings of Christianity are literal truths, not mere metaphors.
6. The Bible offers a clear window into truth.
7. Requests made in prayer are heard and responded to by God.
8. People will receive spiritual rewards or punishments after death for the choices that they make during life.
9. It's important that people in my faith community agree on basic beliefs and behaviors.
10. Without shared beliefs, my faith community would suffer.
11. People ought to devote themselves to the one true religious or spiritual way.
12. A wise person recognizes that there is only one sure path to religious or spiritual understanding.
13. I feel connected to God when I participate in worship services and Christian rituals.
14. I feel the power of my faith community's traditional practices working in my life.
15. I find myself rising above my everyday problems when I take part in the prayers, meditations, or services of my faith community.

Appendix C: Informed Consent

Dear Potential Participant:

I, Tamika Jackson, am a 3rd-year doctoral student in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at William and Mary and am conducting this research study directed by Dr. Craig Cashwell. I am interested in the experiences of counseling graduate students with conservative Christian values in secular CACREP-accredited counseling programs. The purpose of this study is to explore how counseling graduate students who hold conservative Christian values perceive their training experience in secular CACREP-accredited counseling programs. You are eligible to participate if you:

1) are a masters-level counseling student currently enrolled or recently graduated (within the past year) from a secular counseling training program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP)

2) identify as having conservative Christian values (values that align with orthodox, traditional, or conventional Christian beliefs and principles as it relates to biblical authority, moral responsibility, and Christian conduct)

3) have completed coursework in multicultural counseling or are currently enrolled in a multicultural course

Your participation will involve taking part in one Zoom interview of about 60 minutes. You will be asked questions related to your experiences as a student in your counseling program. You agree to subsequently read and review the transcript of the interviews provided by the researchers to ensure accuracy. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. At any time, you can request that the investigator destroy your data or that the investigator exclude your data from any analysis. If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information. Your participation will not impact your educational status.

The Zoom interview will be recorded to ensure accurate data retrieval and analysis. You will select a pseudonym and your responses will be recorded using this assumed name. At the end of the study, any information linking your name to the pseudonym will be destroyed. Following transcription, the recordings will be deleted once the researcher determines that the transcripts are accurate through member checking. The recordings will be stored in a password-protected, One Drive Personal Vault folder with two-factor authentication enabled and will only be accessed by the researcher. I will make every effort to keep your personal information confidential and conceal your identity in the study's results and will keep your personally identifiable information confidential by using pseudonyms and password-protected files. The results of the research study may be published, but your name or any identifying information will not be used. The published results will be presented in summary form only.

There is minimal risk associated with this study, however you could experience some distress when talking about any negative experiences you have had. The benefits of participating in this study are that you will have the opportunity to express your views about your experiences in your counseling program and you will have the opportunity to help develop a research line of inquiry about this subject matter. Societal benefits include the ability to address the needs of conservative Christian graduate students enrolled in secular counselor education programs. You can receive a copy of the results, if you desire, after the conclusion of the research. You are not obligated to respond to all questions and at any time you can withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation and involvement in this study by notifying the researcher by phone or e-mail. After successful completion of the interview, you will receive a $25 Amazon gift card sent directly to your provided email address as a token of appreciation for your participation.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call Dr. Craig Cashwell at (757) 221-1712 or send an e-mail to cscashwell@wm.edu. You are required to notify Dr. Ward, chair of the EDIRC, at 757-221-2358 (EDIRC-L@wm.edu) and Dr. Jennifer Stevens, Chair of the PHSC at 757-221-3862 (jastev@wm.edu) if any issues arise during this study.

By completing the interview and/or survey, you are agreeing to participate in the above-described research project.

Thank you for your consideration! Please keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Tamika Jackson, PhD Student
William and Mary

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Interview Instructions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Have you read the informed consent document in its entirety? Do you have any questions or concerns about the informed consent? Please find a quiet, private place for the interview. Please keep your camera on throughout the interview process. I will review your demographics responses to ensure accuracy. I will begin the recording with your permission and then ask you to choose a pseudonym. I will share a little bit about me as the primary researcher and then we will move into the interview questions.

This is a semi-structured interview, meaning there are pre-established questions to guide the conversation, but we may not get to all of them, and I may occasionally ask follow up questions for clarity. The questions are designed to gain insight around your experiences as a counseling graduate student who identifies as having conservative Christian values who received training (or is currently receiving training) in a secular, CACREP-accredited counseling program. There are 12 questions total; if there are any questions you do not feel comfortable answering, please let me know. With your consent, I would like to take personal notes throughout the interview to help with my own processing, but they will not have any identifying information and will not be included in the results of the study.

Introduction Narrative and Questions

Thank you again for consenting to participate in this study as evidenced by your signature on the informed consent and your presence here today. Just a little about me as the primary researcher:

I grew up in a small Black Methodist church in a rural part of Maryland. I became very involved in the youth ministry at my local church and at other levels in my denomination. As a young adult, I became interested in ordained ministry and eventually became ordained in that same denomination which I would consider holding traditional, orthodox, or conservative views. After several years being bi-vocational, I decided to fully transition to a helping profession and enrolled in a dual-degree Master of Divinity/MA in counseling program at a private university in North Carolina. During my time in that program, I became more aware that my Christian values and views were considered conservative by many faculty and classmates. That and the experiences I have had as a doctoral student are what spurred my interest in this topic. So now that you know a little about me, I would like to learn more about you.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about yourself and what attracted you to the counseling field.
2. How has your Christian identity shaped your life experience?
    a. What beliefs and values are most salient to you?
    b. What relationships and experiences have shaped your religious identity?
    c. How has your Christian identity influenced your views as a counselor?
3. How would you describe your values as a conservative Christian?

4. What are some similarities you notice between your Christian values and the values of the counseling profession? What are some differences?
5. What has your experience been like/was your experience in your counselor training program?
6. How have your Christian values affected your training experience?
7. What thoughts or feelings come up when you think about your training experience?
    a. Follow-up question to assess both thoughts and feelings.
    b. How did these thoughts and/or feelings impact your behavior as a student?
8. What conversations, lectures, coursework, etc. around spirituality/religion have you had/did you have during your training program?
    a. Follow up to get responses in each of these areas.
9. What are your thoughts about integrating spirituality/religion in your clinical work?
10. What scriptures, biblical stories, or bible characters come up when you think about your training experience?
11. What advice do you have for future counseling students with conservative Christian values?
12. Is there anything I didn't ask you that you think is important around this topic?

Appendix E: Individual Depiction – Primary Researcher

Tamika is a 43-year-old Black woman who is affiliated with a Black Methodist tradition. Tamika's Christian identity was passed down to her from her parents in the same way as treasured heirlooms, communal stories, and prized traditions. Attending church, including Sunday School, was her grandmother's mandate for my father, which he, in turn, instituted for his children. She was required to wake up early on Sunday mornings so they could make our way to a small A.M.E. Zion church in a rural part of Maryland where she, along with the other children in the congregation, learned the history of the A.M.E. Zion Church, memorized passages of scripture, and regularly participated in the worship services. It was there that she was taught what it was supposed to mean to love God and live holy. Tamika carried those values and principles with her through her childhood and teenage years and though she was still trying to figure out who she was as an individual, she was very aware that being a Christian was a significant part of that.

Tamika had built a successful career in finance but was bi-vocational for most of that time, spending many years working in congregational ministry. At some point, she decided to fully lean into a helping profession and enrolled in a dual-degree Master of Divinity/MA in Counseling program. In the middle of her divinity school journey, many of the things that she was socialized to believe about holy living collided with her evolving beliefs about what it truly meant to love God and love people. The Christian values that she held so dear - that had shaped her worldview - were called into question as Tamika looked into the tearful eyes of someone who had moved beyond the role of friend to the place of sister, as she explained her fear of losing their friendship if she were to simply be her authentic self. There was a new tension in

their relationship as they struggled to navigate her recently embraced queer identity and Tamika's rapidly expanding Christian identity.

Tamika's process of deconstructing her religious beliefs had started years before however those were small chips in the hardened surface using a chisel. That chisel had now morphed into a sledgehammer focused on demolishing the spiritual/religious framework she had constructed over thirty-five years of living. Fortunately, Tamika was doing this soul work in the context of a supportive community and rather than completely decimating her beliefs this was a soft demolition that allowed Tamika to transform her problematic views into spiritual/religious values that felt more compassionate, congruent, and Christ-centered. Tamika's own experience with reconciling her personal identity with her professional identity as counselor has both informed and enriched this research study.

Appendix F: Excerpts from Reflexive Journal

Journal No. 1:

…[Dr. Martin] introduced me to Heuristic Inquiry (HI) and gave me the assignment to identify 10 articles related to my topic. We met today to go over what I found. I feel like I have a plan for moving forward which feels much more reassuring. I am unfamiliar with HI but apparently it considers the researchers relationship with the phenomenon. I'm not sure what the reflexivity process looks like, but I will begin keeping a reflexive journal just in case.

Journal No. 2:

Dr. Cashwell reviewed chapters one and three. It has taken me longer than I expected but I'm glad to be making progress. I am still fleshing out what HI looks like in practice. I'm somewhere in the second phase of the heuristic inquiry procedure (immersion) which is bringing up a lot for me. I sometimes forget how painful the deconstruction process was and that there is still work to be done. I'm looking forward to diving into the literature and seeing what comes up.

Journal No. 4:

I finished up the section on spirituality and religion in counseling. I realized that despite my qualifications, I often shy away from spiritual/religious integration in my clinical work. I know firsthand that there are so many benefits to incorporating spirituality and religion, but I still hesitate to introduce it. I will go with it if the client brings it up but I do not often broach spirituality/religion with clients. A part of that, I think, is wanting to separate 'Tamika the Christian' from 'Tamika the Counselor.' I'm sure that both can exist, but I have not been intentional about making that a reality.

Journal No. 5:

…The section on Religious Identity Development was interesting. I am a huge fan of Veersaamy's experiential/relational model of religious identity development. When looking at the different statuses, it occurred to me that we often think we are more enlightened than we truly are. We assume that we have "arrived" when we still have so much more work to do! Perhaps spiritual/religious development is more of a journey than a destination.

Journal No. 7:

I successfully defended my proposal! It felt very different from my oral exam. I think I am finally coming to terms with who I am as a counselor and who I am as a counselor educator. More importantly, I am coming to terms with who I am as a Christian and how that identity will influence the others.

Journal No. 10:

I scheduled my first interviews. I am a little nervous about the next steps. I am hopeful that I can get through the data collection and start data analysis within the next few weeks. It's a heavy lift but I think I can do it! I keep hearing Dr. Donner's voice in my head: "hope is not a strategy" lol. We'll see how it goes!

Journal No. 11:

Two of my scheduled interviews were no shows, two others were not legitimate participants. I have started going through the responses a little more carefully to identify people who may not actually qualify for the study. I read a few articles on 'imposter participants' and scams that provided a few pointers on how to spot fraudulent participants. I was shocked by the number of

people who go out of their way to be deceptive. On a more positive note, I had my first legitimate interview! I really appreciated hearing their story! There was a point in the interview when they brought up the difficulty they faced navigating their Christian identity and their queerness and it reminded me of how I ended up on this journey in the first place.

Journal No. 14:

I had an interview with a co-researcher who shared a very similar background (she is in a dual-degree program and worked in congregational ministry). She said something that stuck with me, and I just had to put it down: My Christian identity has "taught me how to love people well." So simple, yet so profound!

Journal No. 16:

I finished my last two interviews, and they solidified the need for this study! There have been so many stories of harmful or unhealthy experiences in the classroom space. I'm terrified and excited all at the same time. I am hoping that my own experiences will inform the way that I show up for students and I also know that even when we have the best intentions, we sometimes fall short. Maybe that's the lesson in all of this…it's a continuous growth process.

Journal No. 20:

I finally finished writing up the results section - yayyyy! My co-researchers were amazing and inspired me to fully embrace my Christian values and to view them as an asset and not something I am actively trying to overcome. That, I think, is the beauty of heuristic inquiry - while learning about the experiences of others, I have learned so much more about myself.

Appendix G: Individual Depiction – Amy

Amy is a 36-year-old White female who is affiliated with the Mennonite tradition. Amy was a "missionary kid" and spent a lot of time overseas with her parents who were missionaries. Amy enrolled in a dual-degree program (MDiv/MA in Counseling) at a private liberal arts university in the South, because she was seeking an environment that felt less restrictive than attending a Christian institution: "I did look at [Christian University] …and it felt constraining…it felt like I could only counsel certain types of people. And I wanted to be able to provide space regardless of a person's background…regardless of their religious background."

Amy's undergraduate education is in the psychology field, and she has experience working in congregational ministry. Her interest in counseling stemmed from recognizing mental health needs within faith communities and a desire to effectively integrate religion and counseling. Amy feels that God has called her to help people and though her faith continues to evolve it is still a central part of her life.

Amy's Christian identity has influenced her views as a counselor in that she is more aware of biases that she carries, specifically related to the LGBTQ+ community. Despite those biases, Amy is committed to providing a "…safe place for people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender…identity." Amy described holding conservative Christian values around fornication and substance use and acknowledged that religious and political identities are often conflated.

Amy identified "love for people" as one of the ways that Christian values and the values of the counseling profession overlap. Amy also offered that many of the qualities that Jesus displayed are similar to counseling values. In terms of value differences, Amy highlighted how the Bible prohibits associating with certain people which would be unethical for a counselor.

Amy has had a positive experience in her training program, finding it to be a supportive environment that encourages critical thinking and personal growth, which is in stark contrast with the judgment she has experienced in church settings. Initially, Amy worried that she would "be judged for being a conservative Christian" and so she was reluctant to share about her Christian identity. Amy has since found safety and support amongst her cohort and the faculty and feels more comfortable talking about her faith but she still has concerns about having to "believe like everyone else…in order to truly fit in."

Amy shared that her Christian values have taught her how to "love people well" and she has considered specializing in religious trauma and supporting third-culture kids and their parents. Though Amy is interested in integrating spirituality and religion into her clinical work, she wants to be identified not "as a Christian therapist but as a therapist who is Christian." When asked about advice for future counseling students with conservative Christian values, Amy emphasized the need to "be open" and to not "assume that you know everything."

Appendix H: Individual Depiction – Chelsea

Chelsea is a 29-year-old White female who recently graduated from a public research university in the southern region. Born in the Midwest and raised in the South, Chelsea grew up in a Christian home. Chelsea has been exposed to several denominations but currently attends an Evangelical non-denominational church. Chelsea described her faith in this way:

> I feel like it is the core of who I am. It's the core of how I see the world. It shapes my worldview. It shapes the way I interact with all people. It shapes the way I interact with myself and the level of compassion I show myself and my own understanding of grace and mercy, what it means to be interconnected to other people.

Chelsea's Christian identity has been influenced by her relationships and interactions with others, ranging from her parents, her husband, and her in-laws to "theologians [and] the random people that sit behind [her] in church that are just really sweet."

From a young age, she knew that she wanted to become a therapist, encouraged by others who recognized her wisdom and her ability to provide sound counsel. Chelsea completed her undergraduate degree in psychology and not wanting to start graduate school immediately, she became a teacher. During the COVID-19 pandemic she found her way back to her goal of becoming a counselor.

Chelsea's clinical work is informed by her Christian identity. She believes that every person is created in the image of God and approaches her counseling practice with the values of compassion, grace, and mercy in mind. Chelsea named several ways that the values of the counseling profession and Christian values overlap and noted that the major difference is "leading someone to their own conclusion versus calling something for what you see it." Chelsea

feels that the positive aspects of conservative Christianity and their potential benefits in counseling are often overlooked.

Reflecting on her training experience, Chelsea acknowledged both the challenges and missed opportunities within her counseling program. She felt a disconnect between her Christian values and the predominantly secular environment of her training institution: “it felt very non-compassionate and like there wasn't a whole lot of understanding behind this idea of what it means to be a person of faith, regardless of your faith in a secular profession.” Despite the frustration she experienced, Chelsea was able to find support within her program, including Christian peers and faculty.

In her current practice, Chelsea integrates her faith based on the needs of the client. Though she values the opportunity to use Christian language and concepts with clients who share similar beliefs, most of her clients do not identify with a specific faith tradition. Chelsea’s advice to future counselors with conservative Christian values is to “ignore the naysayers” and use those values to enhance their work as counselors.

Appendix I: Individual Depiction – Jane

Jane is a 24-year-old White female who grew up in the South, primarily in the Baptist tradition. Jane described her upbringing as being heavily influenced by the Christian values instilled by her parents. While reflecting on her decision to become a counselor Jane shared that she has "always wanted to…help people" and felt "called…by God" to join the counseling profession. Jane felt conflicted about choosing a Christian program or a secular program but ultimately opted to enroll in a secular counseling program at a public research university due to a track/specialization that was important to her.

Jane expressed that her faith has helped her cope with a variety of stressors and is a significant part of her identity. As a counselor, Jane would like to share that with others but recognizes that she "can't just tell others what to believe or what's going to help them." Instead, Jane has found peace by reminding herself that God has given people free will and "there's a right but we can choose to do that or not." Jane believes that her biblical literalism and resistance to "modern culture" are representative of her conservative Christian values. Jane named that empathy, grace, the way that we engage with others, and how we approach emotions are similar values between Christianity and counseling but feels that they diverge around relational topics (e.g., marriage) and abortion.

Jane described having a "very mixed" experience in her training program and found that her values sometimes conflicted with what was taught or discussed in the classroom space. Jane shared that she and some of her colleagues with similar values felt unable to freely express their conservative Christian viewpoints without feeling misunderstood and sometimes encountered "comments…against conservative Christian values or…against faith-based counseling in general." In terms of spiritual and religious discussions within her program, Jane noted that such

topics were typically not included in formal coursework but occasionally arose through assigned readings and informal conversations or class discussions.

Jane expressed a desire to integrate her faith into her counseling practice, possibly in a private practice setting where she could freely incorporate her Christian values into her therapeutic approach. She encouraged future counseling students with conservative Christian values to find a supportive community and to "know what their own values are so that when they're being challenged…they're not wavering as much."

Appendix J: Individual Depiction – Jasmine

Jasmine is a 33-year-old Black female in her 3rd year of a counseling program at a public research university in the South. Jasmine grew up in a small rural southern community where she attended a Missionary Baptist church. She shared that she has been in the church for her "entire life" and participating in activities like Vacation Bible School and Bible Camp. Her relationship with the church instilled a strong Christian identity from a young age. She described herself as naturally attracting people who confide in her and being interested in mental health because of her own experiences navigating family challenges, including her sister's suicide attempt.

Her Christian faith permeates every aspect of her life, shaping her worldview and influencing her "in every way imaginable." Jasmine believes in Jesus as the ultimate truth and the source of identity: "…Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He's the only way. There's no other way. …your identity is found in Christ, so if you don't find Christ, you don't find your actual identity." Jasmine was told that she was called to preach and at one point served as the youth minister at her church. In terms of what makes her Christian values conservative, Jasmine identified her beliefs that homosexuality, premarital sex, and "any form of disobedience to God" are sinful.

When asked about the similarities between the values of the counseling profession and Christian values, Jasmine named "respect, listening without judgment, being patient, and long suffering." She expressed that excluding Jesus from the counseling process when he is "the great Counselor" felt "a little odd" and often feels like not addressing harmful behavior can be difficult.

Throughout her counselor training, Jasmine has faced instances where her faith clashed with the secular nature of her program, like when a professor made disparaging remarks about Jesus or when she was asked to engage in behavior that felt uncomfortable as part of an example in class. Despite these challenges, she found support from peers who understood her Christian perspective and stood by her during difficult moments. Jasmine could not recall much formal coursework or discussion about spirituality and religion outside of multicultural class, and even then, the focus was primarily on ethnicity and race.

Jasmine expressed a desire to integrate spirituality/religion into her counseling practice though she initially shied away from Christian counseling because she did not want to "feel limited." She now recognizes that her clients will likely "see some form of Christ…because of just being an image bearer." Her advice to future counseling students with conservative Christian values is to "keep God with you."

Appendix K: Individual Depiction – Jeffrey

Jeffrey is a 28-year-old White male in his second year of a counseling program at a public research university in the South. Jeffrey grew up in the Midwest and was raised in a Catholic church where mother was a church musician. Jeffrey, who is also a musician, shared that he "always had kind of an orientation towards the liturgy and the beautiful things of the church and the community surrounding the church." Jeffrey's decision to enter the counseling profession was influenced by his experience as a peer mediator in middle school which cast light on his "relational abilities." At one point, Jeffrey considered joining the priesthood but decided to complete his undergraduate studies in music.

Jeffrey's faith has evolved over time, influenced by participation in church activities, retreats, and his studies at a conservative liberal arts college. Jeffrey had a period where he was not attending mass regularly but reconnected after joining the choir at his church. Jeffrey noted that his religious convictions make him different than many of his colleagues and that there is "a sense of isolation. …a sense of it being more of a solo journey in a lot of ways in terms of [his] philosophy about life and how [he wants] to help people."

Jeffrey identified non-judgmental listening, unconditional positive regard, courage, and a willingness to be present in the suffering of others as counseling values that align with Christianity. A preoccupation with self-care and a primary focus on the individual are some of the ways that counseling values and Christian values differ. As it relates to his values, Jeffrey expressed holding conservative views around "life and dignity" (i.e., abortion, euthanasia, immigration) and his preference for "categorization" and moderation which he identified as hallmarks of conservatives. He described it in this way:

> One of the most salient things…that differentiates conservatives and liberals is conservatives tend to want to box things more. …they tend to want to have boundaries and to have differentiation. They want the flow of ideas to be…not restricted but to be moderated versus I think liberals want a more free flow.

Jeffrey shared that as an openly gay man, he continues to grapple with gay marriage and worries more about being "outed as a Christian than as a gay man." Jeffrey acknowledged having strong views around certain topics that he worries may "inhibit [him] from being able to provide competent and adequate counseling to people who might be in certain situations or have certain life experiences."

Jeffrey reflected positively on his counseling training program, describing it as generally good, with occasional challenges. He appreciates the diversity of the coursework and the congenial atmosphere despite not being actively involved in campus life due to commuting and the self-paced design of the program. Jeffrey usually avoids talking about his Catholic faith but will share "more implicitly and try to kind of present in a balanced way…that people are going to be receptive to." Jeffrey acknowledged that there have been limited conversations about spirituality and religion and that there do not seem to be many faculty with a salient Christian identity. Any explicit coursework around cultural identities gave inadequate attention to spirituality/religion which were often overshadowed by other cultural and social issues.

Jeffrey may choose to integrate religion in his clinical work at some point but wants to start with "casting a very wide net." For future counseling students with conservative Christian values entering secular programs, Jeffrey advised them to view their beliefs as assets that can enrich their practice. In closing, Jeffrey felt it was important to note that his choice of a secular program over a Christian one was primarily cost-driven.

Appendix L: Individual Depiction – Mark

Mark is a 27-year-old White Hispanic male who recently graduated from a public research university in the South. Mark was raised in the Southern Baptist tradition but is now affiliated with the Anglican Church. Before settling on counseling, Mark explored law, business, and social work, eventually deciding that he wanted to work "one-on-one with people." Mark described his Christian identity as having a significant influence on his life decisions: "it's shaped every part of my life from the decisions that I've made for my future, going to a Christian undergrad school, to shaping the friends that I gravitate towards, to shaping or helping me choose my life partner."

Mark's family played a pivotal role in shaping his religious beliefs; his grandmother was the church librarian, his father was a deacon, and his mother was also very religious. Christian values like humility and love are foundational to Mark's worldview. His Christian identity has influenced his views as a counselor in that he embraces the inherent divinity in every person which is deserving of respect and dignity. Mark was reluctant to take on the label of conservative, acknowledging that it is "politically charged' and he does not consider himself to be "a political Christian." He does, however, believe that there are ways that he would be considered a conservative Christian including the authority of the Bible and the tenets of Christian faith found in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds.

Mark believes that there is "a lot of crossover" between Christian values and the values of the counseling profession and noted that "in many ways Christians have been doing counseling for a long time, whether that's pastoral through priests [and] people coming for wisdom, coming to help their hurts." In Mark's opinion, the difference between a pastor and a counselor is that counselors want to "help people become healthy aside from…what they

counselor thinks is right and wrong. …and then a pastor is trying to help a person become good or help them become in right standing with God."

In his counselor training program, Mark encountered challenges integrating his Christian identity into the academic and clinical environment. He felt hesitant to openly discuss his beliefs due to perceived biases against conservative Christianity and religion in general. Mark was cautious because he wanted to maintain positive relationships with peers and faculty and avoid the negative stereotypes associated with the Christian faith. He is still reluctant to share his Christian faith with his colleagues for fear that it might impact his career.

He believes in the importance of integrating spirituality into clinical work when clients express a desire for it, and it aligns with the client's goals and needs. Mark advises future counseling students with conservative Christian values not to feel forced to choose between secular and Christian counseling paths but to find ways to integrate their faith into their professional identity.

Appendix M: Individual Depiction – Monica

Monica is a 29-year-old Black female who grew up in the South. Monica comes from a religious family and attended a Baptist church for most of her life but is now a part of a non-denominational faith community. Monica knew from an early age that she wanted to be a counselor which stemmed from a strong desire to help people. Monica is currently enrolled in a cohort-based Clinical Mental Health Counseling program at a public research university in the southern region. Monica described her Christian faith as a moral compass and a source of strength.

In terms of her Christian values, Monica does not consider herself to be as conservative as others but acknowledges that her views on Biblical authority and obedience may be considered conservative:

> I feel like I'm on the closer end of conservative where it may not be as conservative as other people would view it…but then someone else may look at me...they would probably see me as a conservative Christian, but like I feel like I'm not as conservative as I perceive other people to be.

Monica identifies as lesbian and shared how it was difficult reconciling her sexual/affectional orientation with her Christian identity:

> And so, for a long [time]... all my teenage years, I feel like I hid that part of me because I feel like I couldn't be a Christian and be a lesbian at the same time. I felt like there wasn't going to be acceptance. …And I was always like a lesbian. It just wasn't spoken out loud. So, the two things had already existed. They just weren't visibly existing.

Monica named respect, beneficence, and justice as Christian values that she believes are similar to the values of the counseling profession but noted non-maleficence as a point of difference:

> Like if it's something they believe in or the Christian values and you're doing something that they feel like is going against those values, they're definitely willing to cause some harm, whether it's emotionally or whatever. Religion comes first. We're going to obey the word first, and either you're going to get in line with it or you're not.

Having been raised in a Christian household, Monica recalled being required to attend church service even if she did not want to, which she believes is in conflict with the counseling profession's value of autonomy. Monica has had a positive experience in her training so far despite feeling less prepared than her peers when she began the program. She describes herself as a "fly on the wall" in the classroom, preferring to listen to the perspectives of others, particularly during conversations about spirituality and religion. Monica feels these discussions are "not fun to have" because of people's strong convictions.

Appendix N: Individual Depiction – Payton

Payton is a 22-year-old White female in her second year of counseling program at a public research university in the South. Payton completed her undergraduate education in psychology and sociology and chose the counseling field because of her fascination with people and their stories. Payton also had a very positive experience with her own therapy and wants to offer that to others. Payton's mother was raised Catholic; however, religion was not a significant part of Payton's childhood.

During high school, Payton began to explore Christianity with her best friend: "[she] found her faith and so I was asking her just a lot of questions and you know she would talk to me about the Bible and all those kinds of things." Payton's curiosity continued through college, and she became involved in several Christian organizations and joined a non-denominational church in her area. Payton values her relationships with her small group and her roommates, considering them a great source of support in her faith journey.

Payton's Christian identity centers around love and acceptance:

> I really do try to be accepting of everybody. I mean Jesus calls us to love our neighbor, love everyone, not to judge and so I think that has really helped with my counseling as well, and just like being open to different viewpoints other than my own.

Service is another important part of Payton's Christian identity; she is involved in her local community and tries to "provide for those that maybe aren't as fortunate as" she. Payton named "patience, acceptance…and just unconditional love" as similarities she sees between Christian values and the values of the counseling profession. She also emphasized the importance of meeting people where they are and "loving the way that Jesus loves."

Payton described herself as a moderate conservative, supporting views like the right to bear arms, economic health, and the existence of two genders, while also being pro-choice. When talking about her values as a conservative Christian, Payton made the distinction between political conservatism and religious conservatism: “so I still have like some issues that wouldn't agree with like the conservative mindset, or even maybe the Christian mindset.”

While generally positive, Payton acknowledged challenges in expressing her conservative viewpoints in a more liberal academic environment. She feels respected but sometimes perceives a lack of space for different opinions, particularly on topics like gender identity. Payton shared that she enjoys her cohort and feels like they are “very close.” Payton expressed that her training experience has been “positive, excited, and challenging” and though she could have selected a program that was more aligned with her views, she appreciates that it challenges her perspective. There has been limited discussion about spirituality and religion, but Payton is interested in learning more about different religious groups. Despite the lack of formal coursework on religion, Payton highlighted the importance of supportive faculty who understand diverse perspectives and shared a positive experience with a professor who had a similar background.

Payton expressed uncertainty about integrating her Christian faith into her counseling practice. While she sees the potential benefits, she also recognizes the need for clients to feel safe and not judged, especially those who have experienced “church hurt.” Payton suggested that future counseling students with conservative Christian values “not be afraid of your values…and not [be] afraid to let your cohort know you just because they might not agree with you.”

Appendix O: Individual Depiction – Pearl

Pearl is a 33-year-old Black female that immigrated from a country in West Africa. Pearl recently graduated from a counseling program at a private research university in the southern region. Pearl is affiliated with the Baptist tradition but has also attended both Catholic and non-denominational churches. Growing up in Africa, Pearl described a patriarchal society where women's voices were often marginalized. Pearl's father was raised Catholic, which is the dominant religion in her country, but the influence of her aunts led to her family's conversion to Baptist. Her father later became interested in a religious tradition based in Hinduism and other Eastern practices.

Moving to the United States for college, Pearl maintained her relationship with God even though she felt guilt for "engaging in all the things that college students engaged in." She eventually joined a non-denominational church that emphasized Bible-based teaching and community. It was there that she become involved in a sexual abuse support group as a participant and later as a facilitator. Her experience as a group facilitator was the precursor to her enrolling in a counseling program.

Pearl described how her Christian identity has been central to her life decisions and her personal growth. Salient parts of Pearl's Christian identity include prioritizing kindness and showing love to others. She reflected on how her faith influences her clinical practice, and highlighted experiences she's had with secular approaches like Reiki, yoga, and other spiritual practices that she believes conflict with her Christian beliefs. Pearl does not see herself as conservative but believes in "the traditional view of marriage," church attendance, and "following the Bible as much as you can," which she acknowledged is often viewed as conservative.

Pearl identified the “value of healing and loving someone enough that when you see them suffering, you know, being able to take on other people's suffering and being there for them in that time of pain and suffering” as counseling values that overlap with Christianity. She believes that counseling and Christianity diverge when it comes to the means: “the differences, I think in the counseling profession again we’re about what works. It's like we will go all the ways possible.”

Pearl expressed that she “learned a lot of different things” in her program and found it to be “productive.” She described being aware that there were things about her faith that she could not share freely. One of Pearl’s critiques of her counseling program was that they did not adequately address spirituality, though she was able to take an elective course on faith-based counseling. Pearl is open to integrating spirituality/religion into counseling but wants to exercise caution around imposing her beliefs on clients, preferring to let clients initiate those discussions.

Pearl’s advice to future counseling graduate students with conservative Christian values is “be clear about what type of counseling you want to do. …if you're a conservative Christian or at least hold those views, you may want to find a program that aligns with those values” and if you decide to enroll in a secular program “be prepared for the journey….for your beliefs to be challenged and to be labeled as conservative.”

Appendix P: Individual Depiction – Zoe

Zoe is a 25-year-old Black female whose parents immigrated from a country in West Africa. Zoe was raised in the United Methodist Church; this was the denomination her parents belonged to in Africa, and they continued their affiliation once they arrived in the United States. Though Zoe attended church during her childhood and adolescence, she described her faith as underdeveloped and primarily "intuitive" until she reached college. During college, Zoe had "a genuine interest to learn more about the Bible" so she began participating in bible studies and attending a different church in pursuit of a more "intellectual" faith. Presently, Zoe considers herself Christian but is unaffiliated with any particular Christian denomination or tradition.

After completing her undergraduate education, Zoe had time to reflect on her future career plans and decided that she wanted to help people. Despite knowing little about counseling, Zoe applied to a Clinical Mental Health Counseling program at a public research university in the South, from which she recently graduated. Zoe acknowledged that her Christian values were heavily influenced by her parents and later by her peers. Zoe believes that spirituality and religion are heavily influenced by nationality and culture which can shape how people "view the narrative of God and the narrative of His people." When asked about her conservative Christian values, Zoe shared that she believes that the Bible contains "real and genuine truth" which she considers to be conservative. Zoe also named that her feelings about Christian unity and a consensus around "universal truths" may also be viewed as conservative:

> Another I think conservative belief that I have is in terms of the unity of Christ. It's something that I actually like care about a lot. …I think it's confusing and it illegitimizes our witness as Christians if there's so much like chaos and so much dissonance and so much disagreement. So that's something that like I would say it's more conservative

> because I have met people where there's this pluralism like present and just kind of like there's different ways to the truth, and just a lot of grace and flexibility for everything…and I don't really subscribe to that.

Zoe described the importance of relationships, compassion, and presence as shared values between Christianity and the counseling profession and identified the requirement to bracket as one of the major differences. Zoe felt that she "learned a lot" and received "sufficient" training in her program but expressed frustration around the behavior of the professors:

> Now the relational aspects of it, or in terms of like academia, and how professors, you know, how they behave that was a little appalling. … counseling professors, could be so incongruent with what they taught - that was really disturbing to me.

Because of how she was raised, Zoe held professors in high regard prior to her experience in the program and while she understands that "professors are just people," she was still disappointed.

During her training experience, conversations around spirituality and religion were limited and Zoe felt that students were "nervous to talk about their spirituality and their religion in the program." As a student, Zoe described herself as a "chameleon" and found it easy to continue to "bracket" her Christian values because that was something she had been doing before starting her training. Zoe is open to integrating spirituality and religion in her clinical work but only if it is beneficial for the client.

Appendix Q: Responses to Question No. 10

I asked all the co-researchers this question: *What scriptures, biblical stories, or bible characters come up when you think about your training experience?* The responses were too varied to result in a discernible theme, but I still felt that they should be shared. Below are the responses from each co-researcher.

Amy: Hmm. The first one that comes to mind is Jesus at the well with the woman in John 4. And there's a lot of speculation of like why she's there, or you know, was she promiscuous? The fact that you know she had five husbands. But I think that her being there at that time is very significant in that she was not welcomed by the community. And yet Jesus provided a safe place for her and offered her life and growth. And I think also…what pops up to me is like anywhere it talks about like the vine or trees or roots is very like significant for me. Because I have this image of like a person being this tree, and our job as a therapist is to help them find their own strength in themselves as a tree, and like grow those roots deep down. And from a Christian perspective like grow those roots deep down in the love of God. And because that is what's gonna stabilize us when the winds come. And because life is gonna always be throwing us curve balls and there's gonna be storms and whatnot. And it's really like, how deep are your roots? …So, any Scripture that…that has like vine branches, trees…I'm thinking John 15 pops into my head as well.

Chelsea: When I think about my training experience? I don't know. I've never thought about that before. I guess my first thought would be probably some of the apostles who are like, oh, shoot! Now, I'm supposed to go out? Like I only had 2 years of teaching with you, Jesus, like, what am I supposed to do? And it was all very direct. I watched you do miracles now I'm supposed to go do miracles? So, I guess maybe the apostles in the sense of…like the Lord calls us, and we go, and trusting that he'll equip us even when it feels like we're underrated and underprepared. And we're like, oh, gosh, okay, it's me now, like I've received the training and now it's time.

Jane: I think right now…Romans 13:8 -14…that one is definitely was kind of the most recent convicting. First, for how…I think…with the counseling program, having a lot more divided influence between my like community that very much values the same values as I versus like my cohort. They're great, I love them, [but they] don't have the same values as I and sometimes that can be a lot, and it does affect what I intake and how I behave sometimes. …And so that was one that just kind of reminded me that I needed to be like very much living in the truth 24/7.

Jasmine: Jonah is probably my favorite and I realized this before the program, and I saw the story in a whole new light. But essentially Jonah was dramatic…he was all over the place emotionally. Being disobedient, as we all are. I identify with Jonah because for some reason I have trouble accepting my call, so I run. I'm very stubborn. I run a lot. And then to be found running, I guess, by the men, like God stopped the boat and he's going through all these changes. Oh, throw me overboard! Just kill me. It's like what? Now you're suicidal and now you're just sorrowful because now you swallowed up. You couldn't kill yourself, couldn't escape that way. You're sorrowful. You're repentant now you're forced to fast and get clear, get sobered up. And now that you're in Tarshish, you're obviously qualified to do it because the people repented. But now that the people repented, he's petty…he's petty. He's angry and he's like I'm going to build this fort and watch God destroy y'all. It's like, but you just preached to them to get right and now

they're getting right, and you're waiting for destruction. So, he's just all over the place. It's like, well, what do you want? What do you want here? What do you want to happen?

Jeffrey: Hmm! You know, my mom was telling me how apparently, she's been watching this television show that has had a wide appeal for Christian audiences – it's called the Chosen. I don't know if you've heard of it. And she's saying how Matthew is, he's a scribe, really like he's taking down everything that Jesus is saying. Now, of course, this is dramatization of the Biblical stories and that's not directly in it, although I like to think of Matthew having been a tax collector…as being someone who held accounts and held people to an account for their financial records, and that translated into how he wrote like in his Gospel about Jesus, and kind of the Judaic Christian connections. So, I feel like with case notes, I want to channel Matthew - very much so. That's going to be very important because he was keeping track of what Jesus was doing because it was so powerful. We need to view what our clients are doing in session as very powerful for them and for other people in their life, because it has a network effect - what happens in their lives has a network effect for other people.

Mark: Okay. I think that a couple of things. So, I often find myself returning the Psalms, so I think definitely my favorite book of the Bible. I think I've been reading through it kind of continuously for the last 3 or 4 years and part of that is based on my own spiritual journey. I talked earlier about kind of submission as a powerful part of why I think spirituality is important for me. Something that really exemplifies that is Psalm 16. I think Psalm 16:6 talks about the boundary lines you have for me are in pleasant places, and it's this idea that there's boundary lines in our life…and then the next verse is surely I have a delightful inheritance. So, God has great things for us, even if it means that sometimes we feel like we're boxed into a certain thing. But I think that's a natural reality of humanity, so we don't always get to choose our circumstances, but I think that God has peace for us inside of that. I think about how Jesus often went to the marginalized and met them where they were and didn't make them come to him. And I think in a similar way a counselor meets people where they are, even though people are coming to…a counselor's office a lot of times so there's not complete crossover for that. And then I think about the story of the Prodigal Son. I love that story. I love the book by Henry Nouwen on that and just that image of the father running out to meet the son, I think, is a powerful image to think about as a counselor kind of running to meet the client, wrapping your arms around them, and kind of robing them in glory, robing them in kind of majesty. It's kind of like this idea of dignity that everybody kind of demands.

Monica: I could just say [David] and the giant [Goliath]…but I would say that in the aspect that I feel like when I first started, I almost felt like I was... I'm going to say the word inadequate because that's what comes to mind. But compared to my other peers, I almost felt like I just didn't have it. Whatever they had, I felt like I didn't have it. And I felt almost maybe like I wasn't good enough. And a part of me kinda felt like defeated. And then I realized I don't have to maybe have the experience or the knowledge or whatever that they have, but I can also be just as good of a counselor as they are with whatever experience I do have and like the things that just make me, me. I feel like they just had all this knowledge and all this other background stuff about counseling and therapy and like all the theories and all the stuff that we talked about. To me, they became like the giant, and I was just the little person who was just going to not make it. But now I definitely feel like I'm Goliath in a way…I feel like I have rose to the occasion to be able to feel like I can do this, and I know that I'm capable of doing this, whether I've had like a ton of history

on the subject and experience, but I know that I can be a good counselor and I know I have a good thing inside of me, whether it's like my spirit or my personality.

Payton: Oof! I like that question, though. Hmm. Definitely the first one that came to my mind was the parable of the lost sheep. Sometimes that is very much how I feel where I'm just kind of wondering where I'm going, am I doing something right. …And so yeah, sometimes feeling like that lost sheep where I'm like, I have no idea what's going on. People over there are doing this. I'm over here doing this, and I don't really know what's going on like I need somebody to come over here and guide me, and just like, bring me back to the flock, or figure out what I'm doing right. So that was definitely probably my first couple semesters of grad school. Yeah, that was the first thing that came to mind.

Pearl: Hmm. I don't know if I think of a scripture necessarily for this program, but I would say, if anything, the story of Joseph was one that I always resonated with.

Zoe: It definitely…was giving the Israelites being in the desert for sure…it gave like we are in the desert, and we are surviving by like just literally the little bit, whatever they are giving us. …We are surviving. We're using it to grow. …I didn't feel like I was thriving for a very long time, and I think that's exactly what the Israelites in the desert felt like. I'm like we had better, and now we're this desert and we're just trying to survive

Tamika: I really appreciated my co-researchers' unique responses. If I had to identify a scripture or biblical character that described my time in my counseling program, I would have to say Moses. God called him to do something and the first thing he did was tell God why he couldn't do it. All he needed was a reminder that if God calls you to do something, God will equip you to do it. If I were to add a scripture, I would say 1 Corinthians 15:10: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I but the grace of God that is with me." Also, 2 Corinthians 4:7-9: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed."

Vita

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EDUCATION

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