International Counseling Students' Practicum Experience in a Counseling Program in the United States: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Limited attention has been given to international counseling students (ICSs) enrolled in U.S. counseling programs. This phenomenological study examines the lived experiences of six ICSs in a U.S. counseling program regarding the factors that impacted their practicum experience. The study identifies three themes: the learning and growth process, positive impacting factors, and negative impacting factors. It also provides stakeholder recommendations.

Keywords: international counseling students, practicum experience, supervision

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Given the declining number of college-aged American students and the institutional pressure of increasing tuition revenue, universities in the United States have increased the enrollment of international students during the recent two decades (Cantwell, 2015; Hegarty, 2014). In 2018, there were more than 1 million international students in the United States, which increased more than 60% compared with 10 years prior (Institution of International Education [IIE], 2019). Similarly, globalization trends in helping professions such as counseling and psychology and the emphasis on the diversity of student bodies have led to an increase in the number of international students in counseling-related programs (Akkurt et al., 2018; McKinley, 2019). For example, counseling programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) reported that 41% of accredited programs included international students (Ng, 2006). In 2016, CACREP reported 459 international students enrolled in CACREP accredited programs, comprising 1% of all students enrolled in those programs.

However, compared with domestic students, international counseling students (ICSs) reported unique difficulties related to their in-class learning, cross-cultural conflicts that negatively impacted their confidence, and problems in the field experience (Goh et al., 2014). Moreover, because of the differences in culture, language, and counseling systems, ICSs are concerned about transferring what they learned in the United States to their home countries (Goh et al., 2014; Lau & Ng, 2012).

Despite facing significant challenges, limited attention has been given to ICSs, including their field experience (Asempapa, 2019; Ng, 2006; Park et al., 2017). Counseling programs require students to take field experience courses to receive supervision while working with real clients (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016). Programs that admit ICSs have the ethical and professional responsibility to respond to their unique needs (Smith & Ng, 2009). Addressing the needs of ICSs is important, as they may return to their home countries on graduation and promote the internationalization of the counseling profession (Reid & Dixon, 2012). This study, therefore, explores the lived experience of ICSs in field experience.

INTERNATIONAL COUNSELING STUDENTS' FIELD EXPERIENCES

Counseling-related programs emphasize adapting and changing to fit the needs of their students (Reid & Dixon, 2012). For example, CACREP (2016) states that programs "make continuous and systematic efforts to attract, enroll, and retain a diverse group of students and to create and support an inclusive learning community" (p. 7). However, research in counselor education and supervision about counseling students has focused on American racial/ethnic minorities but neglected ICSs' educational needs (Dao et al., 2007; Ng, 2006). With the increasing number of ICSs, counseling programs and counselor educators are faced with the challenges of perceiving a better understanding of the specialized training and unique needs of these students (Reid & Dixon, 2012).

ICSs usually come to the United States to further their education, as they may believe that counseling and psychology in the United States is at the world-leading level (QS top universities, 2020). Nevertheless, ICSs reported unique challenges related to their field experience (Liu, 2014; Park et al., 2017; Wedding et al., 2009). During field experience, they are required to counsel clients from different cultural backgrounds, and the majority of those clients may come from an American culture that is different from their own. Because of the differences, some common problems that ICSs reported were (a) language barriers, (b) a lack of understanding of the nuances of American culture and counseling systems, (c) discrimination from clients and others, and (d) cultural conflicts that negatively impacted their performance in field experience (Liu, 2014; Park et al., 2017; Wedding et al., 2009). They may experience discomfort using specific theories that conflict with their cultural practices (Wedding et al., 2009). For example, ICSs from East Asia may experience countertransference issues such as anxiety in working with emotions and being direct with clients (Liu, 2014). ICSs also reported fears related to managing relationships with coworkers, clients, and supervisors and finding appropriate interventions due to cultural differences (Park et al., 2017). In addition, ICSs have challenges adjusting to the U.S. counseling and school systems as they are vastly different from those in their home countries (Xiong et al., 2021). Moreover, some ICSs reported dissatisfaction with their programs because of perfunctory supervision, insufficient information, and difficulties in securing required field experience sites (Park et al., 2017).

To cope with the challenges, ICSs used strategies such as seeking support, communicating cultural issues with clients, improving language skills, utilizing cultural assets, restructuring cognition, avoidance, and practicing self-care (Liu, 2014). Faculty in counseling-related programs could help ICSs by enhancing their awareness of those students' experiences, such as their cultural adjustment process (Koyama, 2010). Accordingly, they can accommodate the needs of students by listening to them, respecting and recognizing their strengths and cultures, and addressing their difficulties in culturally sensitive ways (Koyama, 2010).

Despite those challenges, ICSs reported benefits of conducting cross-cultural therapy (Georgiadou, 2015; Lau & Ng, 2012). For example, Georgiadou (2015) interviewed 11 ICSs in the United Kingdom, and they reported experiences with clients that promoted clients' awareness of cultures, emotions, and thoughts; built closer relationships with clients who had similar experiences as them; enhanced anonymity with clients; and advanced the students' personal and professional development.

SUPERVISING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN COUNSELING-RELATED PROGRAMS

Supervision plays a significant role in counseling-related training (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). ICSs delineated challenges that they faced within supervision: supervisor insensitivity (supervisors did not attempt to understand their culture), interpersonal isolation (the feeling of being an outcast in various settings), and

intercultural confusion and stereotyping (supervisors made culturally inaccurate or confusing comments; Sangganjanavanich & Black, 2009). Faculty and supervisors in counseling-related programs also reported the challenges of providing supervision to ICSs. In interviewing several supervisors, Attrill and colleagues (2016) reported complex teaching and learning relationships. Because of cultural differences, some supervisors described a lack of preparation to work with ICSs' complex issues and reported the challenges of aiding their professional communication skills (Attrill et al., 2016). The stereotypes held by supervisors toward ICSs' cultural backgrounds could raise tension in the supervisory relationship. Regardless of those challenges and difficulties reported by both ICSs and supervisors, both parties conveyed some positive experiences in which the mutual learning relationship was the foundation (Attrill et al., 2016; Sangganjanavanich & Black, 2009).

The impacting factors of ICSs' satisfaction with supervision included their acculturation level, multicultural discussions, personal characteristics, and the multicultural competence of supervisors (Inman, 2006; Ng & Smith, 2012; Nilsson & Anderson, 2004). A lower acculturation level of students was related to a weaker supervisory working relationship, more difficulties in supervision, more discussion of cultural issues in supervision, and less counseling self-efficacy (Nilsson & Anderson, 2004; Ng & Smith, 2012). Attrill and colleagues (2016) emphasized the importance of professional communication skills in ICSs' success in clinical practice and the relationship with their supervisors. The other factors reported were self-direction, initiating interventions with confidence, and working well with groups and others (Attrill et al., 2016). Supervisors' multicultural counseling competence and cultural discussions were also positively related to supervisory working relationships and the satisfaction of supervision (Inman, 2006; Mori et al., 2009).

In summary, with the increasing number of ICSs and the unique challenges that they face in their field experience, counseling programs, faculty, and supervisors need to develop a better understanding of their ICSs' field experience and unique needs (Behl et al.; 2017; Ng, 2006; Nilsson & Anderson, 2004). There is a lack of literature on ICSs' field experience and impacting factors (Park et al., 2017). Understanding the lived experience and impacting factors for ICSs will help stakeholders promote ICSs' success in field experience. Practicum is the first opportunity for counseling students to apply theories and counseling skills to diverse and ethnic clients in community and school settings (CACREP, 2016). Practicum can serve as a foundation to promote success in their advanced internship field experience. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the practicum experience of ICSs in a counseling program. The research questions are as follows:

(1) What were the lived experiences of ICSs in the practicum?
(2) What were the positive and negative factors that impacted ICSs' success in the practicum?

METHOD

The study employed a qualitative research design from a phenomenological perspective. Phenomenological studies attempt to understand the meaning that participants derive from lived experiences or particular situations (Hays &Singh, 2012; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). ICSs have been viewed as an underrepresented group in the literature with a lack of research and limited attention; therefore, phenomenology provides a distinct voice of ICSs' lived accounts, in contrast to quantitative methods (Branco & Bayne, 2020; Hays & Singh, 2012; Park et al., 2017). Phenomenology was an appropriate method because the researchers desired to investigate and explore ICSs' descriptions, interpretations, and experiences of counseling practicum (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009).

Participants

We employed criterion sampling to obtain participants. Participants had to be at least 18 years old, identify as international students in the United States on a temporary visa, completed a practicum counseling course, and be enrolled in the counseling program. The counseling program was held at a large, private university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, containing two tracks of school counseling and clinical mental health counseling. Researchers identified 38 ICSs who met the eligibility criteria (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). After email invitations, six (16%) ICSs agreed to participate in the study. Since the sample is mostly homogenous with criterion sampling, a sample size of 3–10 is enough to draw conclusions for phenomenological research (Cilesiz, 2011).

All participants identified as cisgender female with a range of ages from 24 to 26 years ($M = 25.16$, $SD = 0.98$). China ($n = 4$) and India ($n = 2$) were their countries of origin. Their length of time in the United States ranged from 1.5 to 7 years ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 2.54$). Five participants were clinical mental health counseling students, and one was a school counseling student (see Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Program	Years in the United States	Types of practicum site
JJ	26	Female	China	School counseling	7 years	Public school
RR	26	Female	India	Clinical Mental Health (CMHC)	1.5 years	Substance rehabilitation

Name	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Program	Years in the United States	Types of practicum site
MM	25	Female	China	CMHC	1.5 years	Counseling facility
CC	24	Female	China	CMHC	1.5 years	Substance rehabilitation
HH	24	Female	China	CMHC	6 years	Private practice
AA	26	Female	India	CMHC	2 years	Mental health services at hospital

Data Collection

The recruitment of participants began after approval from the institutional review board. Student researchers contacted and interviewed participants and transcribed the interviews to avoid potential dual relationship issues (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014). Before data collection, one faculty researcher trained the two counseling student researchers on informed consent and research protocol usage. After obtaining signed informed consent from participants, the student researchers interviewed, recorded, and transcribed the interviews. For recording, the researchers employed a password-protected Skype web conference interface. Interview times ranged from approximately 10 to 40 min. Transcripts and an executive summary of the study's results were provided by the student investigators to the participants to check for accuracy. Five interviews lasted about 35 to 40 min; only the first interview lasted about 10 min, as the participant indicated having time conflicts during the interview. Researchers sent the participant the transcript afterward and solicited additional information that may not have been disclosed in the interview. The student researchers used random initials to represent the participants to maintain the confidentiality.

Instrumentation

The semi-structured interview contained four items regarding the experience of ICSs in practicum. The first item asked participants to describe their experience with practicum, including the site and the practicum course. The follow-up questions were: What has been your experience with site supervision, with university supervision, with practicum class, and at your practicum site? The questions for items two through four were: What has been helpful for you regarding your practicum experience? What were the challenges? And what are

your suggestions for future ICSs in practicum? Those questions intended to probe the impacting factors about their practicum experience.

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) proposed a four-phase process employing content analysis in phenomenology, which includes (a) obtaining a full description, (b) reviewing the verbatim description of experience, (c) coresearchers completing a review of the verbatim process, and (d) constructing a textural–structural description of meanings and essence of the experience. First, researchers obtained a full description through transcribing and recording the interviews. Second, the first two authors reviewed the first participant's transcript separately and employed open coding to identify keywords, references, and texts. After multiple readings of the first participant's transcript, horizontalization of the data included broad categories of ICSs' experience in practicum (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). After reviewing the transcript, the first two authors identified the themes that described the phenomenon of practicum more fully for ICSs. Third, the first two authors reached a consensus on the themes concerning the transcript. Then, they reviewed the transcript to confirm that the themes were supported by verbatim examples (Moustakas, 1994). The first two authors used the transcript as a baseline and reviewed the other five transcripts for convergence and divergence. An external auditor, the third author, reviewed all six of the transcripts and discussed the themes and verbatim examples with the first two authors until a consensus was reached. Fourth, after these steps, a codebook described the meanings of each theme, providing a universal depiction of the experience of ICSs in practicum.

Researcher Reflexivity Statement

To reduce research bias in qualitative research, Kline (2008) recommended that researchers record their roles and connections with the phenomenon of study. The research team was composed of five people. Three members of the research team were counselor educators, and two were master's level counseling students. Identifying as a cisgender, Asian female, the first author is a counselor educator whose research interests include counseling minority clients with a focus on international students. The second author is an African American, cisgender, male counselor educator with research interests in evaluation, spirituality, and diversity issues in counseling. The third author is a white, cisgender, male counselor educator whose research interests include individual psychology, evidence-based practice, and college student development. All three counselor educators had the experience of teaching numerous ICSs in their program. The first author possesses the experience of being an ICS at the doctoral level of counselor education. Both master's level counseling student researchers identified as cisgender, Chinese males who were international students.

Trustworthiness

Triangulation of data, member checking, and researcher reflexivity established trustworthiness. For member checking, the principal researcher sent participants verbatim transcripts following their interviews to verify accuracy through a password-protected email. Further, the participants received an executive summary of the study's results; they had an opportunity to provide feedback on the findings. Transferability was demonstrated by the participants meeting the criteria of being international students, speaking English, and experiencing practicum where they provided thick descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For confirmability, the data analysis team demonstrated consensus through separately analyzing data and then coming together. Moreover, through a separate review, an outside auditor reviewed the transcripts and themes, building more consensus (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through journaling during the data collection, researchers reflected on ICSs and the practicum experience bracketing their assumptions.

FINDINGS

The researchers identified three themes within the practicum experience: the learning and growth process, positive impacting factors, and negative impacting factors. Subthemes emerged under the positive impacting factors, including supportive and encouraging supervision, community support, and personal strength. The subthemes under the negative impacting factors were a lack of support, students' lack of professionalism, and cultural barriers.

Theme 1: Learning and Growth Process

This theme described participants' learning and how they achieved growth during practicum. Several participants disclosed initially having self-doubts because practicum was their first experience in the field. JJ, RR, and AA reported that they were "constantly being hard on themselves," comparing themselves with their peers, and doubting whether they had "made progress" or "been beneficial to clients." However, they also revealed unexpected growth at sites. For example, CC shared her experiences of "feeling shocked" when she took over a client without preparation because her colleague had an emergency, but she calmed down and had a beneficial session with the client. She reflected that the experience was scary but rewarding, as she realized that she had the knowledge and skills to counsel a client even without full preparation. This holistic growth comprised various aspects of their personal and professional development. For example, RR described her growth regarding self-care, knowledge about licensure requirements, and job preparation.

The process of how they grew included utilizing resources, obtaining feedback from peers, and receiving training at sites. Several participants highlighted the importance of utilizing various resources at their sites and by their faculty supervisors. For example, HH reported that she learned about play therapy

from the small library at her site. RR appreciated her faculty supervisor sharing information about crisis interventions and trauma-informed care. The participants also appreciated the feedback and support from their peers in their practicum class. As a part of the structure of a practicum class, students are required to share their experiences at their practicum sites and provide feedback to each other. HH, CC, JJ, and MM shared that it was beneficial to hear and learn from their peers' experiences. RR said, "I got really great feedback. They were very supportive … [and] weren't overly critical."

The participants also valued diverse clients and training models at the sites. This helped them gain exposure to various populations in their clinical work. For example, MM reported that her site scaffolded training in which she first shadowed other counselors. Afterward, with the help of her supervisor, she counseled her own clients. RR revealed her appreciation for the thorough training system at her site, where she got exposed to "different aspects of treatment from the beginning to the end."

Theme 2: Positive Impacting Factors

This theme described the positive factors that impacted the ICSs' practicum experience. It included three subthemes: supportive and encouraging supervision, community support, and personal strength.

Supportive and Encouraging Supervision

One of the most significant factors that participants reported was the support and encouragement from their university and site supervisors. However, they expected different layers of support from the site and faculty supervisors. Moreover, ICSs identified informal supervision from other helping professionals as helpful.

Faculty Supervisors. The participants appreciated how faculty supervisors provided resources and feedback. For instance, AA stated: "I feel like I'm learning a lot from him, just that we learn techniques every week. He's able to provide a lot of feedback." RR disclosed that she was interested in trauma, and her faculty supervisor shared resources with her. Moreover, the participants reported that they found the university supervision helpful when the faculty supervisors provided them opportunities to apply counseling theories. In addition, several participants shared that the faculty supervisors had built a good rapport with them, so they felt supported during their practicum. They described their faculty supervisors as "very available," "supportive," "approachable," and "caring." For example, JJ disclosed: "I can talk with my faculty supervisor without any concerns. I know it is a safe place to talk. She is very supportive and sometimes she even reached out to me."

Site Supervisors. Several participants emphasized the availability of site supervisors. The students appreciated the weekly supervision with their site supervisors to address their concerns. They also reported feeling "supported" and "encouraged" if they could reach out to their site supervisors when needed. For

example, HH stated, "I like my site supervisor a lot and each time I have questions and she [is] willing to offer me answers." Role modeling in supervision was another characteristic that the participants found beneficial. AA said, "He didn't dismiss anything I said. He was very much listening, using all his counseling skills as a supervisor. I think that was so helpful." Another helpful element was positive affirmation and validation. Besides professional knowledge and skills that students can learn in site supervision, receiving positive affirmation and validation from site supervisors promoted the participants' confidence as new professionals, leading to positive experiences.

Informal Supervision at Site. A few participants also mentioned that the interactions with other professionals at their sites were beneficial. Those interactions enabled them to get different perspectives of the helping professions. For example, HH shared her appreciation of her colleague, a social worker, who shared her own clinical experience and how she might handle difficult cases.

Community Support

Besides support from supervisors, the participants reported receiving support from friends, mental health professionals, and networking. The participants described feeling understood when they shared their practicum experiences with their peers and friends. A few participants described their appreciation to their peers in the practicum class for their support. JJ disclosed that she had a friend who was in a different practicum class but did her practicum in a similar setting. They shared their experiences and supported each other.

Only one participant mentioned receiving help from mental health professionals. JJ disclosed that she received helpful feedback and suggestions from her counselor when experiencing and managing conflicts with a site supervisor. She said, "it is helpful to know the suggestions about what I can do and what is appropriate [or not] in that situation."

Several participants brought up the importance of networking, especially when trying to find a practicum site. Participants in CMHC programs need to secure their field experience sites. AA shared her experiences of getting a site, because she knew someone who helped her connect with her supervisor. RR emphasized relying on peers and colleagues and creating a LinkedIn profile to promote networking to expedite the process.

Personal Strength

The participants reported having personal strengths, which helped them thrive in practicum. These strengths included being assertive, motivated, determined, open-minded, and confident. During interactions with their supervisors, a few students mentioned being assertive about their needs. RR also talked about constantly asking for feedback from her colleagues to promote professional growth. Moreover, the students emphasized being motivated and determined, especially when looking for a site or coming across difficulties. AA and CC disclosed that they kept reminding themselves of their professional goals

that had brought them to the United States to stay motivated even when they faced difficulties. AA also shared her experiences of trying every possible way to secure a site. In addition, openness was another strength that students brought up. MM emphasized on being open-minded and curious about the practicum experiences, so she learned about various populations. Last, they highlighted the importance of being confident as ICSs and an awareness of their strengths. For example, MM said:

> … remembering that you also have something to bring to the table. Being in America, that's all they know and that's [their] whole world … [But] we have such a diverse experience that we have so much we can bring to the table.

Theme 3: Negative Impacting Factors

This theme described the negative factors that hindered ICSs' success in practicum. It included three subthemes: a lack of support, students' lack of professionalism, and cultural barriers.

Lack of Support

Even though the participants reported receiving support, several delineated how a lack of support (e.g., program, sites, supervisors, and community) made the practicum experience more challenging. The lack of support from the program was mainly around securing a site. For example, RR, MM, and JJ mentioned that the field experience orientation was helpful regarding logistics; however, they wished they could get more information regarding how to ask questions about their targeted sites. The program provided a list of qualified sites and hosted site fairs; however, the participants reported challenges securing a site, as it was their first experience of finding a job in the United States, and they did not know what questions were appropriate to ask an employer. The participants described the difficulties encountered in receiving support from sites. For example, RR reported discrimination during the search process. A site refused to take her because she was an ICS, and the site assumed she would not understand the clients and had poor language skills. When they started practicum at their sites, they experienced the challenges of feeling isolated and a lack of consistent clients. Feelings of isolation came from a lack of recognition at the sites and a lack of peer counselors-in-training. For example, AA reported feeling "consistent[ly] lonely" because she was the only counseling intern at the site and often felt "dismissed."

Several participants shared challenges because of their site and faculty supervisors. Some participants reported a lack of availability of their site supervisors. For example, MM revealed that it was hard to contact her supervisor because she and her supervisor worked at different locations. The participants reported difficulties because of the lack of professionalism of their site supervisors. JJ shared a few incidents about her supervisor's lack of cultural knowledge and sensitivity during their interactions. For instance, when her supervisor first introduced her to the other colleagues, the supervisor made an

erroneous claim that there were no school counselors in China. JJ also reported her supervisor's lack of boundaries. Her supervisor texted or emailed assignments late at night or over the weekend, along with adding her on Facebook. CC also shared her frustration that her supervisor was not as professional as she expected and "did not care about the client's wellbeing sometimes." Several participants also reported a lack of validation from their faculty supervisors. For example, HH disclosed her frustration toward her faculty supervisor, who emphasized "providing tools and answers" instead of a discussion to validate their capacity.

Lack of support from the community, such as their family and friends, posed another challenge to ICSs. CC talked about her feeling of loneliness, because her family and friends in her home country did not understand her experiences, and she did not have resources to get connected with other students.

Students' Lack of Professionalism

This subtheme focused on the professional skills that students failed to demonstrate in navigating the challenges of practicum. It included the skills to secure a site and deal with conflicts with supervisors. Both MM and RR reported needing more skills to know how to choose a practicum site. MM added that she hoped to get interview tips and additional information about the site to avoid future difficulties.

JJ reported her difficulty navigating conflicts with her supervisor. As previously noted, her supervisor lacked boundaries, cultural knowledge, and sensitivity during their interactions. Moreover, she had a classmate in her practicum class who was her supervisor's friend. She was concerned that the classmate might disclose the discussion to the site supervisor, who might give her an unfavorable evaluation in practicum. Therefore, she did not report the inappropriate professional interactions to her faculty supervisor.

Cultural Barriers

Several participants shared how cultural barriers impacted their practicum experiences. Those barriers included language barriers, marginalization because of cultural differences, counseling system/structural differences, and power dynamic differences. Both CC and HH emphasized the importance of language in the counseling profession, as it requires fluent communication with clients. Specifically, CC disclosed her difficulty in understanding slang. Besides language, the participants reported feeling marginalized because of cultural differences between their home countries and the United States. For example, AA stated,

> it was not only about the language … but also how you think in this Western way and just kind of all of this comes like a commemoration thing. It's like cultural shocks for me. I think it's the most difficult thing …

The participants felt challenged to learn the differences in counseling/social system between their home countries and the United States. CC elaborated her difficulties of navigating the substance abuse intervention at her site, because it was very different from the system in her home country. HH also found it challenging to relate to her clients, as the school system was different from her home country. It took her extra effort to understand the school system in the United States.

The power dynamic differences made it difficult to navigate conflicts with their supervisors. JJ disclosed her difficulty in being assertive and holding boundaries when she had a conflict with her supervisor. She explained that obedience to authority in her culture prevented her from asserting herself. As she chose to endure the unprofessional behaviors of her supervisor, she experienced more stress and less mental well-being.

DISCUSSION

This phenomenological study described the practicum experience of ICSs at a counseling program at a large private university in the Mid-Atlantic region. The study delineated ICSs' experiences of learning and growth in practicum. It also illustrated the impacting factors that promoted ICSs' growth in practicum, such as supportive and encouraging supervision, community support, and personal strength. In addition, factors that hindered their success in practicum, including a lack of support, students' lack of professionalism, and cultural barriers, were addressed.

Regarding the ICSs' learning and growth process in practicum, the participants disclosed having self-doubts during their practicum but experiencing unexpected growth that helped build their confidence. Due to cultural differences between ICSs and their clients, ICSs faced unique challenges (Liu, 2014). However, they often found the experiences of cross-cultural counseling to be rewarding and positively impacting their clients and themselves (Georgiadou, 2015). Growth was achieved by utilizing resources, receiving support and feedback from their peers, and relying on the training process at the sites. Although some ICSs did not feel supported by their training sites, one unique finding in the study is that several participants appreciated the training process at their sites. The students who were observed to be receiving support from their training site mentioned that exposure to diverse client populations, scaffolding training models, welcoming environments, and comprehensive orientations all contributed to their feeling of being supported by their site. Previously, there was little research on how the training process at the sites may positively influence ICSs' training outcomes. This area may be worth further exploration. However, other participants disclosed negative experiences at their sites, such as discrimination and not being recognized by their coworkers. These experiences lead to feeling isolated and frustrated during their practicum experience. Therefore, it is important to help ICSs procure sites that would support their growth and educate sites about the unique needs of ICSs (Tang, 2014; Wedding et al., 2009).

The factors that promote ICSs' growth in practicum included supportive and encouraging supervision, community support, and personal strength. Similar to previous literature, participants valued supportive and encouraging supervision as one of the most important factors in their practicum experience (Liu, 2014; Park et al., 2017). However, the participants expected different layers of support or guidance from faculty supervisors, site supervisors, and informal supervision. For faculty supervisors, the participants emphasized their providing resources, emotional support, and feedback. The characteristics that they expected the site supervisors to possess were availability, role modeling of professionalism, and validation and affirmation. ICSs might hold different expectations toward faculty and site supervisors (Steadman & Brown, 2011). ICSs may regard faculty supervisors as professors but think of site supervisors as role models who directly observe and evaluate their clinical performance. The common element that the participants valued in both faculty and site supervisors was validation and affirmation, boosting their confidence, and building rapport. One factor under supervision that had not been addressed in the previous literature was informal supervision. Besides their site supervisors, participants valued the interactions with other professionals at their sites. The interdisciplinary learning from other professionals may help them learn various professionals' perspectives and prepare them for real work situations.

Another positive factor is community support, which included support from friends, professional help, and networking. International students have reported that having support from friends and family reduces stress (Xiong & Zhou, 2018). The participants shared that networking may help them secure a practicum site, which may be difficult for ICSs (Park et al., 2017). One participant mentioned the benefits of seeking professional help. Previous literature has demonstrated the benefits of counseling students utilizing counseling services (Drew et al., 2017). However, in comparison to domestic students, international students are more unwilling to seek professional help (Xiong, 2018; Xiong & Yang, 2021). More advocacy may be needed to help ICSs utilize those resources.

The participants' personal strengths to help with their practicum included assertiveness, motivation and determination, openness, and confidence. These characteristics may enable them to adopt positive coping strategies to deal with the challenges in practicum. For example, being assertive, motivated, and determined would promote advocating for themselves and insisting that the program help in difficult situations (Attrill et al., 2016; Liu, 2014; Xiong & Zhou, 2018).

The negative factors impacting ICSs' performance included a lack of support, cultural barriers, and lack of students' professionalism. Students experienced a lack of support from the program, their sites, supervisors, and the community. The participants wished they could get more information from the program to secure a site (Park et al., 2017). ICSs reported more difficulties in finding sites than domestic students did. The programs may need to assist ICSs more during the site-seeking process. Another aspect that ICSs identified was the lack of support from supervisors. As mentioned above, support from supervisors was one of the positive factors. However, the participants complained about how some

supervisors were unavailable, unprofessional, and did not provide enough validation. These aspects hindered growth significantly and added stress to practicum experiences. Supervisors who work with ICSs may feel unprepared, especially regarding their multicultural competence (Attrill et al., 2016). The stigma and stereotypes that they held toward ICSs may inhibit building rapport with them and promoting their growth (Attrill et al., 2016). It is the supervisors' responsibility to maintain their professionalism and multicultural competence during their interactions with ICSs (Attrill et al., 2016; Rhinehart, 2015).

Cultural barriers negatively influenced their experiences in practicum (Ng, 2006; Park et al., 2017; Sangganjanavanich & Black, 2009). Language barriers were the most obvious difficulty that ICSs reported (Ng, 2006; Park et al., 2017). Students reported that latent cultural differences between their home countries and the United States could cause feelings of isolation. All the participants were from China and India, whose cultures are significantly different from American culture (Kim, 2001). International students may experience more difficulties in acculturation when there are more cultural differences between their original countries and the host country (Ward et al., 1998). China and India value collectivism, but America emphasizes individualism (Kim, 2001). Moreover, the cultures of emphasizing hierarchical power in China and India may prevent them from being assertive or advocating for themselves, especially with supervisors (Park et al., 2017; Xiong et al., 2021). Participants also reported difficulties in understanding the differences between the counseling systems in the United States and those in their home countries (Goh et al., 2014; Lau & Ng, 2012).

Another unique finding was the students' lack of professionalism, which served as a negative factor in their success in practicum. This factor was interwoven with being a novice in the field and cultural barriers. Lack of experience and cultural barriers resulted in students' difficulties in dealing with conflicts and challenges with supervisors. However, those skills can be obtained with experiences and more knowledge about the appropriate ways to handle cultural differences and conflicts (Park et al., 2017). More training on those topics (such as professional communication skills) may be necessary to promote ICSs' success in practicum (Attrill et al., 2016).

IMPLICATIONS

All the stakeholders who work with ICSs may need to be aware that their ethical and professional responsibility is to respond to ICSs' unique needs (Smith & Ng, 2009). Programs with ICSs need to recognize the support offered to domestic students in providing a list of potential sites or relying on students to establish their network may not be enough to provide the support needed for ICSs. They may offer information or specific training to prepare ICSs for site hunting, such as interviewing skills, questions to ask, and marketing themselves for internship positions. Programs may develop specific policies and procedures for ICSs to help with their field experience, especially when managing difficulties at their sites. A separate ICSs orientation may help prepare them to handle cultural differences, understand counseling system differences, navigate challenges, and establish

coping strategies. These supports may help connect ICSs with previous students to obtain more information and feel less isolated. Finally, programs may need to be more cautious when approving a site for ICSs and train sites about ICSs' unique needs.

Counselor educators need to be aware and mindful of the unique challenges that ICSs have in field experience, such as language difficulties and cultural differences. Counselor educators may provide emotional support to ICSs by showing genuine care and building strong rapport. Counselor educators may promote inclusive teaching that addresses ICSs' unique needs to better prepare for their future careers, especially if they return to their home countries. They may also encourage international and domestic students to connect with their peers to reduce feelings of isolation.

For sites and site supervisors with ICSs, training models should be used that promote inclusive environments for trainees to be acknowledged and valued. It is critical to respect and value ICSs' unique perspectives. For the site supervisors, it is important to make themselves available to ICSs and promote their own multicultural competence. Site supervisors may show genuine curiosity and respect to ICSs and have cultural conversations with ICSs as needed. Site supervisors need to engage in continuous education regarding professionalism, multicultural competence and be role models for ICSs. When working with ICSs, site supervisors may adopt multicultural emphasized supervision models such as culturally responsive approaches (Reid & Dixon, 2012) and models that are specific to ICSs (e.g., Li & Ai, 2020).

As the limitations of the study, the findings should be carefully interpreted and generalized. The generalization of results is limited, because the purpose of the study and the participants were only females from two countries and one counseling program. Another limitation is the lack of discussion about the interactions with clients. This may be because they were at the practicum stage, and they had limited contact with clients. Further, although robust data were gathered through the interview process, the brevity of one interview may have limited the depth of their response. More research around this topic is needed to advocate for ICSs.

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