

Peer relationships in counseling psychology training

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Twelve students from APA-accredited counseling psychology doctoral programs were interviewed about their experiences with peers in their program, and about their values and beliefs about peer relationships in graduate school. Interview data were analyzed using consensual qualitative research. Participants reported a wide range of positive (e.g. collaborative and supportive) and negative (e.g. competitive and hostile) interactions with peers inside and outside of the classroom, in research, and in clinical work. Compared to advisory and supervisory relationships, peer relationships were typically less formal and more open. The sharing of common training experiences generally facilitated mutual understanding among trainees. In addition, a visual analog scale, the peer relationship scale (PRS), was used to measure participants' closeness with peers. Results from the PRS appeared to be useful in distinguishing participants with the most positive and negative peer relationships, warranting further investigation of its psychometric properties and application in program evaluation and research on training. Implications for training are discussed.

Keywords: psychology training; peer relationship; training environment; graduate student; counselor education

Peers exert important influences on people across the lifespan. In childhood, collaboration with peers have been found to motivate children to participate in discussions, imitate and learn from each other, attempt more difficult tasks, and sharpen what they know by explaining it to others (Azmitia, 1996). In adolescence, positive peer relationships have been found to be protective, adaptive, and positively associated with academic achievement (Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2008). Undergraduate advising programs have also capitalized on the use of peers to mentor students on academic- and career-related issues (Seegmiller, 2003). During adulthood, positive peer work relationships have been found to be associated with reduced job dissatisfaction and burnout (Van Emmerik, 2002), whereas negative peer work relationships were associated with low morale and poor team performance (Cox, 2001). In addition, a meta-analysis illustrated that coworker support was positively associated with job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008).

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Although research has been conducted on peer relationships in children, adolescents, undergraduates, and working adults, the role of peer relationships in graduate education has not been widely studied. Although graduate students are similar in age to working adults, the nature of interaction in graduate school is different than in the workplace. For example, coworkers may compete for promotions within corporate organizations whereas graduate students may compete for external funding opportunities and training positions. Mobility at jobs may also result in workers being less invested in building and maintaining peer relationships than is true with graduate students, for whom there may be more of an advantage to cooperate. A better characterization of graduate peer relationships and their role in adult learning may help educators understand the needs of graduate students and foster a more conducive learning environment.

Peer relationships also undoubtedly differ across graduate disciplines. For this study, we were interested in students who choose to study the applied fields of psychology (e.g. counseling psychology) because these students tend to be interpersonally oriented (Gelso, 1979). Being more aware of the influence of others on self and self on others is also an important part of clinical training. They may thus be more sensitive to the effects of peer relationships than are students in other graduate programs.

To date, studies of peers in applied psychology training have focused primarily on problematic peers. For example, Shen-Miller et al. (2011) noted that 44% of master- and doctoral-level students in counseling, clinical, school and combined psychology programs identified at least one peer with problems of professional competence. Rosenberg, Getzelman, Arcinue, and Oren (2005) reported that problematic peers could generate significant stress in students and negatively affect the learning environment. In particular, 95% of the respondents identified specific ways that a problematic peer affected them (e.g. disruption in cohesion of group supervision, and decreased willingness to self-disclose, participate in discussion, and work collaboratively on projects). On the other hand, the extent to which peer relationships exert positive influence on graduate students is less clear from the available research. Furthermore, there has been no investigation of the effects of peer relationships across different activities, such as coursework, clinical work, research, professional development, and social activities.

Another area of exploration relates to similarities and differences between peer relationships and other relationships inside and outside of graduate programs. Compared to advisory/supervisory relationships, peer relationships seem to be characterized by a balance of power and fewer evaluative concerns. These features of peer relationships may facilitate honest feedback and disclosure within the normal limits of social interaction. For example, whether psychology interns disclosed their sexual attraction to clients during supervision or not, they were very likely to discuss such attractions to peers (Ladany et al., 1997). Hess et al. (2008) also documented power differential as one of the major reasons for non-disclosure during supervision among pre-doctoral interns. In addition, Gelso (1979) emphasized the importance of creating a social experience in the scientific training environment in counseling psychology, of which peers constitute a significant part. Unfortunately, in these studies, peer relationships were not the focus of attention, and so these findings were more serendipitous and need to be studied more directly.

Furthermore, the preliminary evidence suggests that peers could play an important role in the training experience of graduate students. Studying peer relationships, in addition to advisor–advisee relationships (e.g. Knox, Schlosser, Pruitt, & Hill, 2006; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001, 2005; Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, & Hill, 2003) and

supervisor–supervisee relationships (e.g. Nelson, Barnes, Evans, & Triggiano, 2008) could provide a more complete understanding of the relational dynamics present in graduate training in applied psychology. Situating peers in comparison to other social support systems could illuminate the role of peers in a trainee's life.

In addition, we would expect peer relationships to change over the course of the graduate program because the nature of peer interactions varies. For example, trainees may complete almost all coursework with their cohort peers (i.e. students who enter the program in the same year), and then part ways to receive clinical training (e.g. practica, externship, and internship). Although we recognize that following trainees longitudinally might offer a more accurate picture of the development of graduate peer relationships, as a first step in this line of research we were interested in how trainees early in their graduate training experience peer relationships and what they expect of their graduate peer relationships after they leave the program upon graduation.

Purpose of the present study

Based on the identified gaps in the literature above, we designed the present study to explore peer relationships in doctoral programs in counseling psychology. In particular, we were interested in examining students' positive and negative experiences with peers across different activities, comparing peer relationships with other relationships in students' lives, and understanding students' values and expectations of their peer relationships.

We used a qualitative approach to generate a preliminary understanding of this under-investigated topic. To this end, consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill, 2012; Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) was used. The use of a semi-structured interview protocol for data collection, multiple coders to arrive at consensus judgments on data meanings, and an external auditor to ensure fidelity between coding and data are strengths of CQR.

To supplement our qualitative findings, we also used a quantitative measure to situate the sample in terms of participants' relative closeness with their peers. Researchers studying the graduate training environment have typically used measures with Likert scales (e.g. Schlosser & Gelso, 2001, 2005, on the advisor–advisee relationship). Although factor analyses of items on such measures allows us to examine different aspects of the relationship, the task of completing such a measure for each peer in a cohort can be arduous. In contrast, Kahn and Antonucci (1980) presented a convoy model of closeness in relationships. Level of closeness of different people in one's life is depicted graphically by three concentric circles (inner, middle, and outer) around the self, with members within the inner circle representing those who are the most intimate. The convoy model has been tested empirically in multiple age groups in many countries, and is often used in the study of close relationships across the lifespan (Antonucci, Akiyama, & Takahashi, 2004). We adapted the convoy model for assessing peer relationships in the present study.

In this study, the term "peer" referred to any counseling psychology doctoral student who belonged to the same cohort group (i.e. entered the program during the same year) as the participant. Students who entered the program at other times were not considered as part of the cohort. Cohort peers were chosen to be the focus of this study because they tend to have the most frequent interaction among doctoral students due to

similarity in their training activities. In addition, we were most interested in studying students who had completed one to two years of doctoral training because they are still developing their peer relationships and tend to be involved with each other, whereas more advanced students go off in different directions as training progresses. We are thus interested in participants' experience with peers as it occurs in "real time," as opposed to recalling peer relationships from a distance where their significance and meaning may have changed.

Methods

Participants

Twelve (9 females, 3 males; 11 European Americans, 1 international) doctoral students in APA-accredited counseling psychology PhD programs across the US participated in this study. They ranged in age from 22 to 33 years ($M=27.08$, $SD=3.15$). At the time of participation, 8 students had completed one year and 4 students had completed two years of doctoral study. All reported a clear sense of who their doctoral cohort members were, even though at least 7 participants came from programs that admitted students at both the bachelor's and master's levels.

Interviewers and judges

Three (2 females, 1 male; 2 international, 1 European American) counseling psychology doctoral students served as interviewers and as judges on the primary research team. They ranged in age from 25 to 34 years ($M=28.67$, $SD=4.73$). A 60-year-old white female professor in counseling psychology served as auditor.

The first three authors were peers in the same year (i.e. cohort) of one doctoral program; their particular cohort was very close and collegial. In terms of biases, the first three authors all reported desiring closeness with peers and valuing honesty and loyalty in peer relationships. They believed that relationships with peers constitute an important part of the graduate school experience. They speculated that positive peer relationships enhance the learning experience through creating a sense of belonging, providing social and informational support, and fostering collaboration on projects. They also believed that, because of their shared experiences, peers understand what one goes through in the graduate program more than other individuals do. Furthermore, they speculated that negative experiences with peers, such as criticism and competition, could be a significant source of stress in graduate school. The auditor was a professor in, and had been a training director of, the same counseling psychology program. She had seen considerable fluctuation in the cohesiveness of peers across and within cohorts over time. She believed that peer relationships are often as important as relationships with research advisors and clinical supervisors in graduate school.

Measures

Interview protocol

A preliminary interview protocol was developed based on a literature review and the first author's experience with peer relationships in counseling psychology training. This

protocol was revised based on a one-hour focus group of eight current counseling psychology doctoral students. The revised protocol was then reviewed and revised based on the auditor's feedback. Next, the interview protocol was piloted on two other current students and again revised to yield the final interview protocol (see Appendix 1).

The interview protocol was semi-structured in that all the standard questions were asked to everyone, but the interviewers were also encouraged to probe to help participants explore unique areas in depth. The first part focused on a broad description of peer relationships in the context of different training activities. The second part focused on a more in-depth comparison between peer relationships and other relationships inside the graduate program (e.g. with research advisors and clinical supervisors) and outside the graduate program (e.g. with family and friends), as well as participants' expectation about peer relationships in the future.

Peer relationship scale

Adapted from the convoy model of adult relationships (Antonucci et al., 2004; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980), the peer relationship scale (PRS) was used as a quantitative measure of perceived closeness among cohort peers (see Figure 1(a) and (b)). Participants are given a circle on a PowerPoint slide that represents the field of peer relationships. The self is represented by a black dot in the center of the circle. Dotted concentric circles around the black dot reflect different intimacy levels, with the inner circle representing intimacy, the middle circle representing moderate closeness, and the outer circle representing distant relationships. Participants place a different colored dot for each peer at the appropriate distance from the black dot (self). The closer a colored dot appears to the black dot, the closer the participant feels towards that person. Participants are also asked to, as much as possible, arrange the colored dots in relation to each other to represent their perceptions of how cohort members feel towards one another. The distance (in mm) between each colored dot and the black dot was measured using a ruler, summed, and averaged for each participant to arrive at a score that represented perceived closeness among the cohort.

Procedures

Recruitment

Eight faculty members from 8 APA-accredited counseling psychology doctoral programs were contacted to recruit doctoral student participants. These faculty members were graduates of the program that housed the co-authors, but they have graduated over a wide range of years and had different research foci. The doctoral programs where recruitment occurred were also located in different geographical regions of the United States. Faculty members were asked to approach one student who had recently completed one year and one who had recently completed two years of the program and ask if they would be willing to participate. Given that most of these faculty accepted only one doctoral student per year, this essentially meant that they invited participation from all their students at these levels. If the student was willing and gave permission, the faculty member forwarded the email to the investigators.

Potential participants were emailed a description of the study, the interview protocol, and the PRS; they were asked to respond via email to provide consent to participate in

this study. Participants were also told that the referring faculty member would not know whether or not they completed the study, and that they could stop participation at any time.

Of the 15 students who gave their email addresses to the faculty members (one faculty member nominated only one student), 2 did not respond to investigators' invitation, and 1 consented but did not respond to follow-up emails. Thus, a total of 12 students consented and completed all parts of the study (80% response rate). Upon receiving consent, participants were contacted via email to arrange a time for the first phone interview.

Interviews and measure

Prior to data collection, interviewers each did two pilot interviews so that they were familiar with the interview protocol and applied it consistently. The interviewer started the first telephone interview by restating the purpose of the study, confirming confidentiality, stating that the interviews would be tape-recorded and transcribed without identifying information, and reminding participants that they could withdraw from participation at any point without any penalty. At the end of the first interview, which lasted between 41 and 78 min ($M=59.67$, $SD=11.13$), the interviewer arranged a time within 1–2 weeks for the second interview. The interviewer also informed the participant that s/he would be sending the PRS via email right after their conversation and asked the participant to return the completed measure via email before the second interview. The second interview lasted between 30 and 52 min ($M=39.92$, $SD=6.91$). The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim (with the exception of minimal encouragers, stutters, and silences) and then checked to ensure accuracy of transcription.

Qualitative data analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed according to the CQR method (Hill, 2012; Hill et al., 1997, 2005). In other words, we determined domains, constructed core ideas, conducted a cross-analysis, and audited as follows.

Domains

Judges independently examined the interview protocol and three interview transcripts to develop a list of domains (topic areas), which they discussed and revised by consensus. The judges then used this list independently to assign each meaning unit (i.e. a complete thought) in each transcript into one or more domains, and then reached consensus about the unit-to-domain assignments.

Core ideas

For the first six transcripts, the three judges independently reviewed participants' responses in each domain and wrote core ideas (i.e. the essence of participants' responses in more precise and concise wording). The judges then discussed and came to consensus about the wording of core ideas. For the remaining six transcripts, rotating

teams of two judges each wrote core ideas consensually and the third judge reviewed the core ideas and provided suggestions.

Audit

The auditor reviewed the consensus version of each case (i.e. the raw data and core ideas within domains) and provided feedback to the judges about the domain assignment and the accuracy of the core ideas. Judges reviewed the auditor's comments and reached consensus about how to incorporate the auditor's suggestions.

Cross analysis and audit

Judges independently read the core ideas written across the 12 participants for each domain and came up with categories reflecting the themes in the data. Judges then discussed and came to consensus about the categories, and used this list to code each core idea into one or more categories. The auditor reviewed the categories and codings and provided feedback and suggestions. Suggestions made included clarifying category names (e.g. change "usually only with some peers" to "with only some peers") and keeping more consistent categories across domains when appropriate (e.g. having the categories of "positive" and "negative" across peer interactions in the classroom, in clinical work, and in research). The judges reviewed and discussed the auditor's comments and arrived at consensus about incorporating her thoughts into the cross-analysis. Finally, the judges reviewed the entire cross analysis for all domains and categories to come up with parsimonious ways to combine domains/categories to reduce redundancy. The resulting cross analysis was also audited.

A final draft of the manuscript was emailed to all participants to verify that their identities have been sufficiently protected. No changes were made during this verification process (although one participant could not be reached via the email on file).

Results

Qualitative findings

As customary of CQR studies (Hill 2012; Hill et al., 1997, 2005), we grouped categories into general ($n = 11-12$), typical ($n = 7-10$), and variant ($n = 2-6$), to reflect the prevalence of each category across participants. Because of the large number of categories, we only discuss the general and typical categories in the text unless a variant category was particularly noteworthy, stood in meaningful contrast when compared to the general/typical category, or if there were no general or typical categories in a given domain. Direct quotes from participants are presented with the participant's code (e.g. [P1]) to show that examples were drawn from different participants in the sample (Table 1).

Values and beliefs about peer relationships

Participants typically reported valuing respect and acceptance from their peers. Descriptors falling under this category included civil, friendly, respectful, and tolerant. One participant said, "I don't want to be around individuals who are very judgmental" [P11].

Table 1. Participants' discussion on peer relationships.

Domain or category	Frequency
<i>Values and beliefs about peer relationships</i>	
Value basic respect/tolerance/acceptance	Typical
Value collaboration/work-related support	Typical
Value closeness/cohesiveness	Variant
<i>Description of peer relationship</i>	
Overall	
Similarities promote closeness; differences limit closeness	General
Positive	Typical
Negative (e.g. competition)	Typical
Less cohesive as program advanced	Variant
In classroom	
Positive (e.g. collaborative)	General
Negative (e.g. competitive)	Typical
Wish for more peer interaction	Typical
In clinical work	
Limited interaction	Typical
Positive (e.g. open and honest feedback/safe and supportive environment)	Typical
Negative (e.g. hostile, superficial, not open)	Variant
Consult with people outside the cohort	Variant
In research	
Positive (e.g. collaborative, supportive)	Typical
Negative (e.g. competitive)	Variant
Limited interaction	Variant
Professional development and professionalism	
Attend conferences and professional development activities	Typical
Concern about peers' professionalism and ethical conduct	Typical
Trust most peers/no concern	Typical
Peer supervision/share information	Variant
Not work-related	
With whole cohort	Typical
With only some peers	Typical
Satisfied (e.g. personal connection, desire for more interaction)	Typical
Dissatisfied (e.g. superficial, conflict, different lifestyle/interests)	Variant
<i>Comparing peers and others</i>	
Clinical supervisors	
Similarities	
Supportive, acceptance, and encouragement	Typical
Offered feedback/advice/different perspectives	Typical
Differences	
Supervisors more experienced and offered more professional advice/directives/resources	General
Supervisors more evaluative/authoritative/formal; more learning together and open/relaxed/honest/personal with peers	Typical
Shared more information with supervisors (e.g. countertransference)	Variant
Supervisors less supportive/helpful	Variant
Research advisors	
Similarities	
Discuss ideas and share knowledge	Variant
Share an interest and passion in research	Variant

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Domain or category	Frequency
Provide advice/assistance/feedback	Variant
Support and value participants' work and ideas	Variant
Work on research together	Variant
Differences	
More specific advice/expertise/techniques/guidance from advisors	Typical
More open/honest/relaxed/personal/informal/less intimidating with peers	Typical
More support/validation/keep each other on track with peers	Typical
Share resources/give feedback/discuss research with peers	Typical
More evaluation/keeping on track from advisors	Variant
Friends and family	
Similarities	
Emotional support/caring/confidant/trust/loyalty	General
Fun/companionship/laughter/good times/good conversations	Typical
Provide advice, feedback, perspectives, instrumental help	Typical
Differences	
Peers understand/bond more because they share common experiences	General
Get more support from outside of the program	Typical
Peers more competitive	Variant
<i>Specific incidents with peers</i>	
Helpful	
Content	
Work-related (e.g. statistics, clinical training)	Typical
Difficulty in interpersonal relationships (inside or outside of program)	Variant
Process	
Advice/suggestion/perspective/discussion/feedback/instrumental help/guidance	Typical
Understanding/support/validate feelings/trust	Variant
Share good times through the incident	Variant
Involve other peers	Variant
Consequence	
Closer to helpful peer and other peers	Typical
Closer to helpful peer but not other peers	Variant
Unhelpful	
Content	
Insensitivity	Typical
Verbal altercation	Variant
Consequence	
Negative effect on relationships with unhelpful peer and other peers	Variant
Negative effect on relationship with unhelpful peer but not other peers	Variant
<i>Expectations for peer relationships in the future</i>	
During graduate school/internship	
Closer with some, more distant from others	Typical
Drift apart	Variant
Get closer	Variant
Ten years from interview	
Sporadic contact (email, phone, Facebook, reunions)/become acquaintances	Typical
Will not be very close or lose touch; contact depending on location	Typical
Continue relationship with closest peers	Variant
Maintain professional contact (e.g. networking, consultation, conferences)	Variant

Note: General = 11 to 12 cases; typical = 7 to 10 cases; variant = 2 to 6 cases.

Besides basic levels of regard, participants also typically reported a desire for a collaborative environment with their peers where they could feel supported at work (e.g. cooperation, collaboration, non-competitiveness, openness, communication, trust, helpfulness, and support). According to one participant, “We can all succeed and I think it’s actually more beneficial to be able to share ideas and help each other ... my biggest value is that I don’t feel the need to be competitive towards my cohort” [P6].

Description of peer relationships

Overall peer relationships

Participants generally reported that similarities with peers brought them closer, whereas differences limited closeness. These similarities and differences involved personality (e.g. introversion/extroversion), life stage (e.g. marital status, have children or not), research and social interests, religious faith, progress in program, and career goals. For example, one participant commented, “I think we all like each other and we get along, although we’re in different places in our lives so it’s hard to always get together” [P5]. In addition, participants typically reported both positive (e.g. friendly, cohesive, close, loyal, comfortable, lack of guardedness, jovial, personal, open, encouraging, and candid) and negative (competition with peers, followed by hostility, lack of safety and trust, criticalness, and sarcasm) aspects of their peer relationships.

Interactions with peers in the classroom

Participants generally reported having positive interactions with peers in the classroom. One participant said, “We can kind of buddy up for that semester to make sure that we’re covering all our bases ... discussions are that much more vibrant because people are really willing to put themselves out there ... that’s been the most enjoyable part” [P3]. However, participants also typically reported negative interactions with peers in the classroom, and positive and negative interactions were not mutually exclusive. For instance, P3 also observed, “This kind of competitive energy ... trying to give the right answer to the faculty member for every single question he or she asks ... to me that’s less productive and not as enjoyable.” The balance between generally positive interactions and typically negative interaction indicates that participants who reported negative interactions almost always also reported positive interactions with peers in the classroom. It is therefore understandable that despite the mixed interactions, participants typically wished to have more interaction with peers in the classroom (e.g. “I wish we had more classes where our whole cohort was together” [P1]).

Interactions with peers in clinical work

Participants typically reported that they had limited interaction with peers in terms of clinical work. The interaction they did have typically involved discussing counseling theories and previous experiences with clients and supervisors, role playing counselor and client scenarios, and brief discussion of cases. In spite of the limited experience, however, participants reported that the interactions they had with peers with regards to clinical work were typically positive (e.g. “She had a genuine interest in what I was saying and was really concerned with how I was doing, and that meant a lot” [P10]).

Interactions with peers in research

Participants reported that they typically had positive interactions with peers in the research realm. These interactions were marked by respect, collaboration, support, enjoyment, and helpfulness. For example, a participant who did a research project with several of her peers noted, "At times different people have different ideas, and if you're not open minded you can probably get into a clash or disagreement with them. And I feel like we're pretty open-minded and respectful of each other's views" [P11].

Professional development and ethics

Participants typically reported attending conferences and engaging in professional development activities with their peers. Related to professionalism, participants typically expressed that they trusted most peers to behave ethically (e.g. "definitely respect the confidentiality of clients" [P12] and "people are very conscious about practicing ethically" [P7]). However, it was also typical for participants to have concerns about one or more peers' professional competence/conduct (e.g. "talked pretty negatively about clients" [P8], "socially awkward" [P11], and "functioning might be impaired" [P2]).

Interactions with peers in social settings

Participants typically had some interactions involving the entire cohort and some interactions involving selected peers from the cohort. They reported that their interactions were typically satisfactory (e.g. feeling of a personal connection to peers and desiring more/regular social time with peers). Notably, however, interactions were variably negative. For example, one participant reported, "Most of our interactions now are school or program related activities and we rarely socialize outside those activities. And when we do, on the rare occasion that we do, you either tend to break off into your groups with the people you're more connected to or you stay surface level" [P2].

*Comparing peers and others**Peers vs. clinical supervisors*

Participants typically reported that both peers and supervisors offered support, acceptance, and encouragement. One participant said that when facing a particularly challenging event, "I really felt like my peers really rallied around me and were really there to support me, and my supervisor did the same and that really felt good" [P10]. In addition, both peers and supervisors typically provided feedback, advice, and alternative perspectives to clinical work. "They offer different perspectives on that, but at the same time it's kind of geared at the same thing in helping develop professionally" [P4].

In terms of differences, participants generally reported that supervisors were more experienced and offered more professional guidance than their peers. A participant said, "Clinical supervisors tend to bring a lot more experience so I think they have different things to say. And I may take their advice more seriously" [P1]. Another difference lies in the level of formality in interaction. Whereas participants were typically more formal when interacting with supervisors because of their authoritative and evaluative role, participants were more honest, open, relaxed, and personal with peers. One participant

stated, “If you saw a client for the first time and you thought that guy has an overwhelming personality, you would go to a peer but you wouldn’t go to a supervisor and say he seems like he has an overwhelming personality, he’s going to be a lot to handle, I wonder how it’s going to go. You don’t want to show those kind of doubts and stuff to a professor” [P6].

Peers vs. research advisors

No general or typical categories emerged in terms of similarities between peers and research advisors. Variant categories that emerged were that both peers and advisors contributed in discussing research ideas, communicating interest in research, providing feedback and support, and working with participants on research projects.

On the other hand, participants reported that research advisors typically offered more expert guidance, whereas peers were typically more approachable. One participant noted:

With my advisors at times you can definitely see that there’s a knowledge difference, obviously. And that gap in knowledge difference for me can make it feel very intimidated, especially when it comes to statistical concepts. With my peers, though we all vary in terms of our statistical level, I don’t feel as intimidated. [P11]

Participants also reported that peers typically offered more support and validation (e.g. “understand the struggles of the research process more” [P3]). In addition, peers typically shared more resources with participants (e.g. “I get actual tips for how to actually do things ... whereas my advisor is more conceptual” [P9]) and engaged in broad discussion about research (e.g. reflect on research interests and meaning of research projects).

Peers vs. friends and family

Participants generally reported that both peers and friends/family provided emotional support and a feeling of trust (e.g. caring, loyal, and dependable). A participant responded, “Both of them are giving me the support, and motivation, and kind of like cheerleading” [P11]. Another participant referred peers and friends/family as “people you can confide in, people that you can depend on when you’re in a pinch or need a favor” [P2]. Peers and friends/family also typically offered enjoyable companionship and fun times (e.g. laughter, good times, and good conversations). In addition, participants typically received instrumental help and advice from both peers and friends/family. One participant said, “If something happened, most of the people in my cohort would extend, ‘Can I do anything for you?’ or ‘Just let me know,’ and that’s the same thing my friends would do” [P6].

In terms of differences, participants generally reported that peers understood their work more than did friends and family members because they shared common experiences in the program. One participant said:

The thing that I get from the cohort that I don’t get from the other friends is just the general understanding of the pressures associated with being in the program. And I feel very understood by them. And when I talk to friends and family that are not in the program, I feel a little frustrated sometimes because they kind of brush over things and don’t really

have a grasp for a lot of the emotional things that you go through as a brand new counselor. [P12].

On the other hand, participants typically had more overall support and closeness from people outside of the program. For example, one participant said, “The people outside my program know me better than the people inside because they’ve known different parts of me” [P9].

Specific incidents with peers

Participants identified a specific incident in which s/he felt helped by a peer. They also identified a specific incident in which the relationship with another peer was strained. For each type of event, they provided a description as well as described the consequences.

Helpful incident

Participants typically reported that helpful incidents with peers were work-related, such as getting help with statistics classes and data collection for research projects. A variant type of helpful incident involved obtaining guidance from peers on how to deal with challenging interpersonal scenarios, primarily in the graduate program (e.g. changing dissertation chair, dropping a research project, and turning down the romantic pursuit of a peer). The help that peers typically provided was thus instrumental in nature, such as giving advice and feedback to participants (e.g. “talked through exactly what I should say in the email” [P1]) and providing assistance with work submission (e.g. “I had a final paper that I needed to turn in and then I had an emergency ... she actually did a lot of things to help me get that paper turned in” [P8]).

With respect to the consequence of the helpful incident, participants typically reported that they not only felt closer to the helpful peer but also came to generally value positive relationships with other peers. One participant noted, “Examples like that ... helping each other out with something ... reminds me that I do really believe that it’s nice to be friends with the people in your cohort and not just see them as coworkers or acquaintances” [P1]. Another participant observed:

Maybe not all of them would drive half an hour during the winter to pick me up (which the helpful peer did), but at the same time if I don’t put that effort in or recognize them as people beyond just classmates, that’s something that I should start doing if I haven’t done it already. [P4]

Unhelpful incident

Participants typically attributed strains in peer relationships to incidents in which peers insensitively made dismissive remarks, engaged in social exclusion, or judged participants’ values (e.g. too young to get married). The specific consequences were all variant, with some participants reporting a negative relationship only with the unhelpful peer (e.g. “It didn’t affect my perception of the group” [P7], “I didn’t generalize it to

how all my peer interactions are” [P11]), and others reporting a more negative view on peer relationships on the whole (e.g. “When some people have negative energy, it just kind of puts everyone’s guard up when you start feeling that way and definitely limits my ability to get to know people and feel safe and let other get to know me as well” [P3]).

Expectations for peer relationships in the future

Participants typically anticipated that they would become closer with some peers but more distant from others during the remainder of graduate school and internship. One participant stated, “I see myself getting a lot closer with some individuals and probably a lot further apart with others” [P11].

When asked to predict their relationship with peers 10 years from the time of interview (recall that participants were first- and second-year doctoral students), participants typically anticipated having only sporadic contact with peers (e.g. email, phone, Facebook, and reunion). In addition, participants typically expected that they would not be very close to their peers unless they were in close proximity. One participant noted, “If I end up living in the same town with someone, our paths will probably cross, but otherwise I don’t really intend to be trying to keep in touch” [P2]. Thus, it seemed that participants expected to remain relatively close to peers while in graduate school but sensed that such relationships would wear with time.

Peer relationship scale

Participants’ scores on the PRS ranged between 16.43 (closest peer relationships) and 63.40 mm (most distant peer relationships) ($M = 41.35$, $SD = 12.57$; possible range = 0–80 mm). When asked about their experience in completing the PRS, 9 out of 12 participants reported that filling out the PRS in between interviews allowed them to reflect on their peer relationships. One participant noted, “If I hadn’t filled this out, I wouldn’t have taken time to reflect on that (peer relationships). You know, we’re just so busy” [P10]. Another participant said, “I thought it was really neat. It gave me a different perspective to see it visually and to think about it in those terms. Yeah, a little more perspective on where I lie in terms of my peers” [P8].

To bring the data to life, we present the examples of two cases, one of which had predominantly positive peer relationships and one with predominantly negative peer interactions. We selected the cases that had the lowest and highest scores on the PRS to illustrate the range of peer relationships participants experienced in their graduate program. Figure 1(a) and (b) provide a graphic demonstration of how these two participants viewed their peer relationships.

Illustrative examples

A case of positive peer relationships

Mary (a pseudonym), a 22-year-old female international student beginning her second year of doctoral studies, reported being “extremely satisfied” with her peer relationships. She had a “best friend” in the program, and their relationship had “blossomed” since

they entered the program (this peer was represented by the dot closest to the center in Figure 1(a)).

Mary did not take many classes with her cohort during the first year, but she worked with some of her peers on a research project. She described their interactions as very respectful and said that everyone could share ideas freely without worrying about being judged. Mary and a peer also went to a professor to voice concerns about a class, and they were able to get improvements that benefited the whole class. In addition, there were monthly social functions attended by most of the cohort, and Mary often invited peers to her house.

When asked about what contributed to the positive peer relationships, Mary indicated that the faculty tried to foster a non-competitive atmosphere and treated each person equally. Mary was appreciative (and pleasantly surprised) that her peers kept one another informed about opportunities for assistantships, even when such positions were scarce. Mary believed that promoting cohesion among peers in counseling psychology is particularly important because the profession espouses the need of social support for well-being.

Although Mary had primarily positive experiences with peers, she also reported tension with one peer, who was represented by the dot farthest from the center in Figure 1(a). The peer had made socially inappropriate remarks that caused Mary to doubt this peer's clinical competence, and she and her peers found it difficult to give this person feedback during practicum (We were all kind of walking on eggshells).

Mary hoped that her relationships with her peers would remain close in the future. She noted that life circumstances (e.g. family, children, and moving) might create distance, but she believed that she would remain close to her two closest friends.

A case of negative peer relationships

Suzie (a pseudonym), a 25-year-old European American female beginning her second year of doctoral studies, described her peer relationships as "mainly professional" and not friendships. She had hoped to have a close group of friends in the program, but that was "definitely not the case." She said that there was an atmosphere of hostility and a lack of cooperation and friendliness among her peers. She wished that her peers were more collaborative, tolerant, and considerate of others' feelings when speaking and making decisions that affected the group (e.g. who sits on a committee and what time to start a class).

In classes, Suzie reported that half of her cohort (including herself) were more outspoken. The others rarely contributed to discussions, and when they did, they were negative. In one instance, some peers "ganged up" to criticize another peer's clinical work. Suzie herself felt targeted when several peers commented sarcastically that she was completing program requirements faster than the rest of the cohort. Suzie described her multicultural course as a "disaster" because of the self-disclosure component, and noted that some peers "flat out refused to do the assignments." In clinical practica, Suzie indicated that discussions of countertransference reactions were superficial because no one felt safe opening up. Suzie most enjoyed the research components of her program because none of her peers were involved.

Reflecting on the development of her peer relationships, Suzie recognized that an unresolved, negative incident with a peer early in the program contributed to her being

wary and setting boundaries with peers. She acknowledged, however, that there was one peer with whom she was somewhat able to talk about her school-related concerns (this peer was represented by the dot that is closest to the center in Figure 1(b)).

As a consequence of her overall negative interactions with peers, Suzie avoided taking classes with them or engaging in social interactions with them as much as possible. She did seek help from students in other cohorts because she felt closer and safer with them. Suzie hoped to complete her studies early and “have absolutely no relationship” with her cohort peers after graduation. She looked forward to having a fresh start with a new cohort during internship.

Discussion

The results obtained in this study demonstrate a wide range of experiences that one may have with peers as a graduate student in counseling psychology. On one end, peers can be true comrades who provide tremendous support and genuine friendship during an intense graduate training experience. On the other end, peers can be the bane of a trainee’s existence in a graduate program, such that one wants to avoid one’s peers as much as possible. Although most peer interactions are not as extreme and contain a mix of positive and negative experiences, they constitute a significant part of the trainee’s training environment. In addition, the PRS enhanced the interview findings in the present study. Completing a scale, in addition to having the interview protocol ahead of time, seemed to trigger different ways of processing the same topic. We discuss these findings in more depth here.

Values and beliefs about peer relationships

Participants in this study typically preferred cooperation over competition with peers. This sentiment is reflected in a survey study of counseling psychology students conducted 35 years ago. Halpin and Adams (1978) reported that their sample of 203 participants all preferred less competition and more cooperation with peers. The desire for cooperation among counseling psychology students is also not surprising given that students in this field have been found to be more socially oriented than other psychology specialties, including clinical psychology (Zachar & Leong, 1997).

Roles of peers in counseling psychology training

Peers often provided instrumental assistance in graduate school. Such assistance ranged from helping with statistics classes and research projects, to providing advice and perspectives on clinical cases and on how to handle challenging interactions with others (e.g. faculty) in the graduate program. Thus, peers offered an important resource for trainees.

Peers also offered emotional support through the different components of graduate training (e.g. clinical work, research, and coursework). A supportive environment not only enhanced trainees’ satisfaction with their peer relationships but also their learning. Participants with more positive peer relationships indicated that they had rich class discussions because peers were not afraid of being vulnerable with one another, whereas those with more negative peer relationships were hesitant to share their ideas or

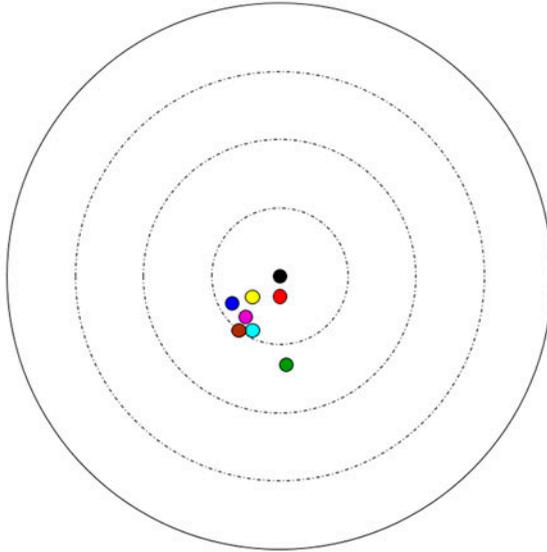
Peer Relationships Scale

The circle represents the field of peer relationships in your graduate program cohort.

The black dot in the center represents you within your cohort, while each colored dot below represents a unique member of your cohort. There may be more colored dots available than cohort members.

Place each cohort member onto the field of peer relationships. The closer a colored dot appears to the black dot, the closer you feel towards that member of the cohort. Arrange the colored dots in a way to also represent how you think cohort members may feel towards one another.

As a guide, each ring within the field denotes the relative levels of closeness. These levels range from intimate (closest to the black dot), to moderate, and to distant (furthest from the black dot). You may place colored dots either on or between the rings.



(a)

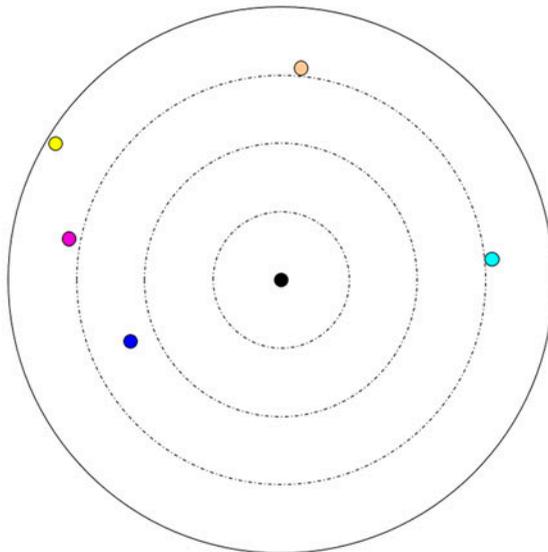
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(b)

Figure 1. (a) A case of close peer relationships as depicted on the peer relationship scale, (b) A case of distant peer relationships as depicted on the peer relationship scale.

self-disclose because they feared being judged by their peers. Similarly, Fleming, Glass, Fujisaki, and Toner (2010) reported that higher levels of safety established in supervision groups facilitated a greater variety of learning when compared to groups in which members felt less safe.

Negative experiences with peers may not only limit learning but also affect trainees emotionally. In this study, the most often reported type of unhelpful peer interaction was peer insensitivity. Such interactions, which included social exclusion and judgmental or dismissive exchanges, resulted in participants' feelings being hurt. An interpersonal orientation often characterizes students in counseling psychology (Gelso, 1979) and facilitates their development as empathic practitioners, yet it may also be accompanied by interpersonal sensitivity. It remains to be seen whether insensitive peer interactions have greater effects on trainees in applied fields of psychology compared to other fields of study (e.g. computer science).

Comparing peers and others

Clinical supervisors

Participants generally reported that they received more expert guidance from clinical supervisors, while peers offered the opportunity for them to learn together. This finding is consistent with Linton and Hedstrom's (2006) results that participants valued didactic feedback from supervisors and alternative viewpoints offered by peers. Interestingly, Ritenour, Gutsch, and Kazelskis (1983) showed that conformity pressure from peers was just as effective as that from faculty in influencing participants' judgment of counselor effectiveness. Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) have also highlighted how novice counselors measure their work effectiveness using explicit feedback from supervisors and peers. Thus, although participants may obtain expert guidance from their supervisors, they may still be influenced by their peers' comments during practica and group supervision.

Participants typically reported that they were more open and honest with peers than with supervisors in their discussion of clinical material, including personal reactions to clients. This finding replicates those found in Hess et al. (2008) and Ladany et al. (1997), in which the power differential between supervisors and supervisees hindered disclosure of difficult topics during supervision. In addition, novice counselors are characterized by high levels of anxiety and evaluation apprehension (Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998). Peers thus appear to be a particularly significant source of non-evaluative support during the early stages of clinical training.

Research advisors

Similar to the differences found between peers and clinical supervisors, participants reported that they were more candid in their interactions with peers than with research advisors. This finding is supported by Inman et al. (2011), who reported numerous personal and professional issues that trainees would not disclose to their advisors. Participants in the present study also reported that peers were typically more helpful than advisors in normalizing their difficult experiences in research endeavors. Indeed, graduate students who have heard a peer talk about her math anxieties and how she succeeded in a statistics course reported significantly greater gains in statistics self-efficacy

than those without such a model (Bartsch, Case, & Meerman, 2012). Having peers with similar levels of research skills and knowledge may therefore buffer trainees' wavering confidence as beginning researchers.

Friends and family

El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh, and Bufka (2012) reported that the top three coping strategies for psychology graduate students with stress are talking to friends, talking to family, and talking to classmates. Our finding replicates their results in that support from peers was important but typically secondary to the support from friends and family. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that participants in El-Ghoroury et al. ranked seeking peers above other ways of coping, such as regular exercise, hobbies, and personal therapy. Perhaps having peers who share a common understanding of the training experience, as our participants indicated, in part explains why peers were sought out frequently for support.

Expectations of peer relationships in the future

In spite of valuing collaborative peer relationships during graduate training, most participants anticipated that their interaction with doctoral program peers would dwindle after graduation. They also expected that continued closeness with peers would likely depend on physical proximity, a finding that reflects the "proximity factor" in relationship building (e.g. Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950). Thus, counseling psychology trainees may benefit from positive relationships with peers while they are in the graduate program, but anticipate that as they graduate and enter the work force other peer relationships (e.g. colleagues in the same agency) will become more important sources of support and collaboration.

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

This study provides a descriptive overview of peer relationships in graduate programs in counseling psychology. Positive and negative aspects of peer relationships were investigated across different contexts of interaction (e.g. classroom, research, clinical work, and social setting), illustrated using specific examples (e.g. helpful and unhelpful events), and compared and contrasted with other relationships inside and outside of the graduate program. Although only 12 participants provided data in this study, their experiences with peers were wide-ranging and offered preliminary understanding of a significant yet rarely studied component of the training environment for counseling psychologists.

The present study may have been limited by its sampling procedure. Student participants were personally nominated by faculty members in their respective programs to participate. Faculty members might have chosen these students out of convenience (e.g. their advisees), and/or because of other student characteristics (e.g. agreeableness and likeability) that might have influenced the quality, and the perceived quality, of their peer relationships. In addition, the faculty members who were approached for recruitment were all trained in the same doctoral program as the co-authors (which undoubtedly increased the likelihood of getting a high return rate). These faculty members

might have similar values towards peer relationships in training that they passed onto the student participants. In spite of non-random sampling, and the potential for participants to respond in a socially desirable way to interviewers, the reported quality of peer relationships was quite varied in valence and intensity. It remains to be seen how results obtained from a random sample would differ from those reported here.

Another limitation is the lack of diversity in the study sample. Studies on the supervisory relationship have revealed unique needs of students of color (e.g. Burkard et al., 2006), international students (Rice et al., 2009), and LGB students (e.g. Burkard, Knox, Hess, & Schultz, 2009) in the training environment. Given that participants in this study were predominantly white, heterosexual, and US citizens, it is unclear how present findings on peer relationships apply to trainees of minority statuses. Since many counseling psychology programs aspire to recruit a diverse student body, it is important to conduct more research to understand the interactions among students from different backgrounds and explore factors that contribute to facilitative peer relationships.

The current study offers a focused cross-sectional view of peer relationships in the first and second years of doctoral training in counseling psychology. The specificity of the sample increases consistency of results and the likelihood that findings may be transferrable to similar students at this stage of doctoral training (Hill & Williams, 2012). The cohort group in the early years of doctoral training was chosen because peer interaction tends to be more intense (i.e. before students obtain external clinical placements and focus on individual dissertation research), and thus more salient in one's graduate training experience. We acknowledge, however, that having more first- than second-year participants might have limited the scope of peer relationship experiences participants potentially reported. Further research is needed to understand how peer relationships function among advanced doctoral students and interns, and across different cohorts. Longitudinal research will also help clarify how peer relationships change during and after doctoral training (although we have some preliminary hypotheses based on participants' speculations about their peer relationships in the future).

The PRS was used to quantify participants' perceived closeness with peers, which facilitated the identification of illustrative cases of close and distant peer relationships. Participants who had the highest and lowest PRS scores indeed offered contrasting descriptions of peer relationships, providing initial support for the validity of the PRS. However, six out of the 12 participants mentioned that it was hard for them to also consider how peers relate to one another when completing the measure. Future research should be conducted to examine the psychometric properties of an alternative PRS that asks raters to only consider their own closeness with peers (regardless of how peers relate to one another) and investigate its usefulness in studies pertaining to the training environment (e.g. associations between peer relationships and program satisfaction and training outcome).

Implications for training and practice

Establish the desired norm early

Yalom and Leszcz (2005) noted that group norms tend to be established early and are hard to change. Such an observation among group therapy clients may apply to graduate cohorts as well. In the positive case, Mary mentioned that she experienced the

program's collaborative environment as early as during her admission interview. In the negative case, Suzie thought that her guardedness with peers developed after an early conflict that she had with a peer during a class. Faculty should therefore be particularly alert with the group climate that is being established among first-year students. Are students respectful when addressing their differences in opinions? Is constructive criticism balanced with positive feedback? When disagreements arise between peers, do instructors facilitate the conversation and model healthy conflict resolution, or do they curtail the conversation for the sake of preserving class time? Promoting safety and respect in the classroom early in graduate training may help to set the "script" for future peer interactions and influence the quality of peer relationships that develops. It could also be helpful to have all first-year students together in a foundation class to build cohesion.

Reflection as an intervention

Despite a significant investment of time, participants generally viewed the interview experience positively. Several participants thought that completing the PRS and the interview motivated them to re-evaluate their peer relationships and think about ways to improve them. For example, after seeing the distance between her and most of her peers on the PRS, one participant said, "I don't know if this is a normal experience for a student or if this was something that I was doing to kind of keep people at a distance" [P3]. Similar to the self-awareness training that trainees receive as beginning counselors, trainees might use the interview protocol and PRS to reflect on their experiences with peers and to decide whether or not they want to do anything differently when interacting with peers to ensure that they are getting what they need from the training environment.

Consulting trainees to identify potential problems

The non-evaluative aspect of peer relationships facilitates openness among trainees that may lead them to have information about peers (e.g. substance use and ethical violations) not otherwise accessible to supervisors and faculty members. Such information may be especially valuable in the early identification of problematic trainees. Rosenberg et al. (2005) also reported that trainees become dissatisfied with their training program when faculty members do not engage them in addressing issues with problematic peers. Taken together, programs need to think carefully about ways to encourage trainees to bring problems to faculty attention. Although the process of discussing one's peers is likely to be uncomfortable, learning how to provide constructive feedback and deal with concerning colleagues professionally and ethically are important training tasks.

Conclusions

Overall, our findings indicate that peer relationships play an important role in the training experience of graduate students in applied psychology programs. This study provides a preliminary snapshot of ways that peers can both facilitate as well as hinder the learning process and adjustment to graduate school. Promoting positive peer relationships could not only enhance graduate students' clinical, research, and classroom

experiences, but may also set the stage for positive relationships with colleagues in the future. The nature of peer relationships and the development of strategies to encourage positive peer relationships represent important topics of exploration for future studies.

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Appendix 1. Interview protocol

First interview

Thank you for your interest in our study of peer relationships in counseling psychology doctoral programs. The interview today will take approximately 45–55 min. Your gift of time to this project is deeply appreciated. We respect and honor the experiences you share with us about your interactions with your peers, and we want to assure you that your responses will be kept strictly confidential. This interview will be tape-recorded and transcribed, but any identifying information about you or your peers will be removed from the transcript. Also, you may choose to withdraw from the study at any time. Do you have any questions?

For this study, we define peers as students who are attending the same training program as you are. They should come from the same cohort as you (i.e. entered the program in the same year). Please respond as best as you can to the following questions, and be as honest as possible in your responses so that we can capture a true representation of peer relationships in counseling psychology training. Any questions?

- (1) Please describe your cohort in the graduate program.
- (2) Tell me about your relationships with peers in your graduate program.
- (3) What are your values and beliefs about interacting with peers?
- (4) Describe your interactions with peers inside the classroom (i.e. engaging in program-related activities).
 - (a) How satisfied are you with these interactions?
 - (b) What would you change if you could?
- (5) Describe your interactions with peers in terms of clinical work.
 - (a) Give me an example.
- (6) Describe your interactions with peers in terms of research.
 - (a) Give me an example.
- (7) Describe your interactions with peers in terms of course work.
 - (a) Give me an example.
- (8) Describe your interactions with peers in terms of professionalism and ethics.
 - (a) Give me an example.
- (9) Describe your interactions with peers in social settings.
 - (a) How satisfied are you with these interactions?
 - (b) What would you change if you could?
- (10) Now, I am going to ask you about specific incidents related to your peer relationships.
 - (a) Can you tell me a time when a peer has helped you?
 - (i) How did this incident affect your relationship with this peer?
 - (ii) How did this incident affect your perception of peer relationships in general?
 - (b) Can you tell me a time when your relationship with a different peer was strained?
 - (i) Were you and your peer able to resolve the problem?
 - (ii) If yes, what happened in the process of resolution?
 - (iii) If no, why not?
 - (iv) How did this incident affect your relationship with this peer?
 - (v) How did this incident affect your perception of peer relationships in general?
- (11) We defined peers as students in your cohort in the program. How would you

describe your interactions with other students in your graduate program or department?

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me today. I am wondering if I can call you at some time next week to do a second interview. This interview will be approximately 30–40 min in length. I will be asking you for any new thoughts on peer relationships since our interview today. You may also make changes or clarify the information that you have given me in this interview. In addition, I will have some other questions about peer relationships for you as well.

Second interview

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the second interview. Just like the last interview, today's interview will also be tape-recorded and transcribed. Any identifying information will be removed from the transcript. You may also stop participation at any point of the interview. Are you ready to begin?

- (1) You had a chance to complete the peer relationship scale. Can you tell me more about your thoughts completing this measure?
- (2) What thoughts or feelings have you had about peer relationships since our last interview?
- (3) Is there anything that you would like to clarify or change about the comments you made in the last interview?
- (4) What do you get from peer relationships that may be different from what you get from your relationships with friends outside of your graduate program?
- (5) What do you get from peer relationships that may be similar to what you get from your relationships with friends outside of your graduate program?
- (6) In terms of research, what do you get from peers that may be different from what you get from research advisors?
- (7) What do you get from peers that may be similar to what you get from research advisors?
- (8) In terms of clinical work, what do you get from peers that may be different from what you get from clinical supervisors?
- (9) What do you get from peers that may be similar to what you get from clinical supervisors?
- (10) How do you think your relationship with peers will be in the future,
 - (a) During graduate school?
 - (b) Ten years after graduate school?
- (11) What has it been like for you to participate in this study?
- (12) Would you like to receive a report of the results of this study? If so, how should I send this to you?
- (13) Finally, I am going to ask you for some brief demographic information.
 - (a) Gender
 - (b) Race/ethnicity
 - (c) Age
 - (d) Sexual orientation
 - (e) Marital status
 - (f) Citizenship
 - (g) Did you relocate to attend graduate school? If yes, how far?

- (h) Year in current graduate program
- (i) Number of students in cohort
- (j) Gender, age, and race/ethnicity of students in cohort
- (k) Number of students in program

Thank you once again for being so generous with your time. I am really grateful with what you have shared with me, and I hope that this study will contribute to a deeper understanding about the influence of peer relationships in the training of counseling psychologists.

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