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Voices of graduates from clinical social work master's programs : the impact of the education process on the self and on personal relationships

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Voices of Graduates from
Clinical Social Work
Master's Programs: The
Impact of the Education
Process on the Self and on
Personal Relationships

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore, by way of first-hand accounts of recent

graduates from clinical social work master's programs, the impact of clinical social work

education and training on the self and on personal relationships of those who go through

the education and training process. Ten participants answered a series of open-ended

questions providing the opportunity to gather rich accounts of participants' personal

experiences, and to extract themes that may not have been brought to light in previous

research.

Major findings were that most participants experienced self-reported personal

growth as a result of their clinical social work education, while some participants also

experienced the process of social work education as internally stressful or as causing

stress for their relationships or to their relating to others. The outliers for this study were

those participants who commented that clinical social work education had a minimal

impact on their personal development or on their relationships to others in their personal

lives. Most participants also commented on personal psychotherapy being a valuable

support and learning tool for them both personally and professionally.

Given that there has been a lack of studies collecting narrative data on the

personal impact of clinical social work education on students or recent graduates, future

research in this area is needed in order to gather a larger number of voices on the subject

at hand. This would increase the awareness of clinical social work students and

educators regarding common areas of enhancement or interference in the self and relating

to others that research subjects attribute to clinical social work education and training,

and this would be of value to the field of clinical social work.

VOICES OF GRADUATES

FROM CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK MASTER'S PROGRAMS:

THE IMPACT OF THE EDUCATION PROCESS ON THE SELF

AND ON PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

A project based upon an independent investigating,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this study I have examined, from the perspective of recent graduates from clinical social work master's programs, the impact of clinical social work education and training on the self and on personal relationships. The purpose of this research is to reveal common themes of growth and/or struggle internally within the self or in regards to relating to others and personal relationships that participants attribute to their clinical social work education process.

Clinical social work students conduct psychotherapy for the first time as part of their training while they are also in the process of developing a professional clinical social work identity. Given that students are engaging in a rigorous combination of practicing clinical work and participating in coursework that may inform their personal lives, and given that clinical social workers use the self as a primary tool in professional practice, it is reasonable to assume that narrative findings in this study of the impact of clinical social work education on students personal lives and relationships has implications for clinical social work practice.

As a current student in a clinical social work graduate program, I have heard students, educators, and administrators refer to clinical social work education as a therapeutic, socialization, or transformative process. I have engaged in several conversations with fellow clinical social work students, generated by coursework material of a personal nature or by performing in the therapist role, regarding our

individual psychological development or relationship and family dynamics, and students have disclosed to me through these informal conversations the significant impact that their graduate education has created in their personal lives. I also observed that, while I was encouraged in my classes and internships to self-reflect on my social status in the world and on my responses to individual clients and while I was learning a psychologically minded language, this self-examination and learning process seemed to be impacting my personal wellbeing and development, along with my personal relationships.

My formal and informal learning process caused me to wonder if there are common or differing challenges and rewards experienced by individuals who engage in clinical social work education and training. After I could not find scholarly research focused on this topic of interest, I wondered if it may be useful to clinical social work students and educators to name those challenges and rewards. I was interested in discovering patterns regarding how clinical social work education and training may impact individuals' personal development, if or how the self-reflection process through coursework, process recordings, etc. may have personal impact, and how the education process may impact personal relationships, which the field of social work considers to be a power aspect of the lives of human beings. I was also curious to uncover patterns regarding how clinical social work students use personal psychotherapy during the education process.

I began this project working under the assumption that it was reasonable to assume that practicing in the role of a therapist for the first time, participating in coursework of a personal nature, and developing a professional social work identity were

likely to have a significant impact on personal lives and relationships of some clinical social work students. This research is of value to students, clinicians, and educators in the field of clinical social work because the personal life of a clinician impacts his or her professional life, given that the self is a primary tool for a clinical social worker. Thus, I conducted this study to raise awareness regarding the potentially intense and/or personal nature of clinical social work education for some clinical social work students, and to name common areas of struggle and growth for those who experience the education and training process.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This work is an attempt to use related literature and interview data to explore the impact that clinical social work education may have on the personal lives and relationships of those who go through the education and training process. Clinical social work students experience an identity development process and begin practicing clinical social work as part of training. Separate bodies of related research discuss social worker professional identity development, and the effects of practicing clinical work on clinicians. These bodies of literature point to themes that are further explored by this project.

This chapter contains six sections. It begins with an introduction followed by the sections: self reflection in social work education, social identity development in social work education, a review of studies on the impact of psychotherapists' jobs on their personal lives, a review of studies on the impact of psychotherapists' jobs on their partner relationships.   Next follows a section on help seeking among psychotherapists, and the chapter concludes with a summary.

Introduction

Carpenter and Platt (1997) conducted a study demonstrating a connection between the development of personal and professional values and identity for social workers. In breaking down the many components of professional social work identity, Carpenter and Platt (1997) state, "The acquisition of a professional social work identity involves a

growing self-awareness coupled with a growing identification with the role of a social

worker and with the values and ethics of the social work profession" (p. 339). Carpenter

and Platt (1997) conducted a study of 127 clinical social workers exploring the sense of

fit between personal values and traditional social work values. Social workers were

asked to describe their personal and professional values. Content analysis revealed that

there was a strong similarity between personal values and professional social work values

and goals.

    In addition, one social worker wrote a paper describing the connection

between the personal and professional during his journey from a first year social work

student to a psychoanalyst much later in his career. Smaller (2002) states:

> Not only was I learning about an invaluable process, but also about the
> uniqueness of the (social work) profession. Social work had evolved from a set of
> values, not from a methodology, like in psychology or medicine. Starting where
> the client was at, respecting uniqueness of the individual, separating one's own
> values from the client's, respecting and enforcing self-determination become
> essential principles in conducting any kind of treatment. These values spoke to
> significant aspects of who I was and who I was becoming as a professional (p.
> 54).

The authors of these articles establish a significant connection between personal

and professional values and identity development, but they do not explore further the

potential implications for those entering the field of social work of this connection.

    A review of the literature related to how clinical social work education impacts

students' personal lives and intimate relationships reveals a related body of literature on

self reflection, professional identity development, and social identity development in

social work education. Most of this literature consists of a theoretical discussion among

social work educators. There are few studies that gather the first hand experience of

social work students, and each of these studies examines a specific fragment of social work education, i.e. field placement or class discussion. Research has not yet been done gathering data regarding the impact of clinical social work education as a whole on students' personal lives and relationships. There is a related collection of studies that examines the potential positive and negative impact of psychotherapists' jobs on their personal lives and relationships. This research does not take into consideration in particular the profession of social work or the position of being in clinical training, but it is useful in informing the creation of an interview guide to carry out this research project.

Self Reflection in Social Work Education

Although there is variation among social work programs in the level of self-reflection that is built into the curriculum, the Council for Social Work Education's accreditation standards (2008) state as part of the curriculum, practicing self-reflection as a means to developing certain core competencies as a social worker. Statements included within the Council for Social Work Education's accreditation standards (2008) include: students must practice "personal reflection and self-correction to assure continual professional development", "recognize and manage personal values in a way that allows professional values to guide practice", and "gain sufficient self-awareness to eliminate the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse groups" (pp. 3-5). CSWE values that support these curriculum standards reflect the NASW's (National Association of Social Workers) Code of Ethics. For example, three principles included in the Code of Ethics are "challenging social injustice", "elevating service to others above self-interest", and "recognizing the central importance of human relationships" ("Code of Ethics", 2008, pp 5-6). In order to challenge social injustice one must gain awareness of

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one's social location; in order to put a client's needs as primary one must become aware of one's own needs; and while bearing in mind the power of relationship one must be cognizant of personal strengths, challenges, biases, motives, etc. Social work students are provided opportunities for self-reflection respective to individual programs and individual instructors, through readings, course assignments, class discussion, supervision, process recording, and informal means such as peer conversations.

There is a growing literature discussing reflection and reflective practice in social work education (see, for example, Yip, 2005; Heron, 2005; Man Lam, Wong, Leung, 2006; Clare, 2007). Yip (2005) defines reflection in social work practice as "a process of self-analysis, self-evaluation, self-dialogue, and self-observation". Yip (2005) uses case examples to demonstrate possible consequences of reflective social work practice for social work students, finding that self-reflection can be very constructive resulting in self-enhancement and generation of new solutions to difficult situations when given the appropriate conditions provided by supervisors, agency administrators, social work colleagues, and social work students themselves. On the other hand, Yip (2005) cautions that under inappropriate conditions, self-reflection in reflective social work practice can be damaging to the professional and self-development of social work students, quickening an individual's search for self-evidence of personal and professional shortcomings. To illustrate, Yip (2005) describes an example of a student who has a very critical supervisor, and ends up doubting his own abilities so much that he decides to give up the social work profession.

Other authors on the topic of self-reflection in social work education focus less on the personal experiences and consequences of practicing self-reflection through

the social work education process; instead, they discuss the importance of including the self in the process of knowledge creation in social work practice, and developing a capacity for reflective practice and critical thinking (Lam, Wong, & Leung, 2006; Clare, 2007). Heron (2005) writes that in order for social work students to create an anti-oppressive practice, it is essential to reflect on the privileges associated with social location, and on their own subject positions. Heron (2005) explains that as a professor at an MSW program, she exposes students to readings on self-reflection, and encourages students to reflect on the impact that their academic work is having on them as social workers and individuals, and to examine why they respond the way they do. Clare (2007) outlines an attempt to engage social work students in a teaching, learning, and assessment exchange that promotes self-reflection. She finds a common theme among those who participated in the exchange, that students moved from relying on knowing, to relying on an ability to learn as a basis for qualified practice. The majority of material that has been written on the subject of self-reflection in social work education has been carried out in the form of theoretical discourse, rather than in the form of qualitative or quantitative research.

There are a limited number of research studies gathering the first hand experience of individuals entering the field of social work. Lam, Wong, and Leung (2006) conducted a qualitative study exploring the learning experiences of social work students during their field education by way of collecting reflective logs from students. The study findings revealed that while students were practicing social work in their field placements, disturbing experiences with clients were catalysts for reflective thinking, and that this reflective thinking was often focused on a search for or verification of self-

identity. In this study, Lam et al. (2006) examine the reflective process of social work students in relation to their fieldwork education; however, no study has been conducted thus far gathering and examining students' reflections concerning the social work education process as a whole. Clinical social work students are simultaneously learning to use the self as a primary tool in social work practice and developing a professional social work identity. The research above, pointing to the potential overlap in social work students' professional and personal process and to the importance of self-reflection in social work education, indicates that it would be valuable to gather the voices of individuals entering the field of social work.

Social Identity Development in Social Work Education

Within this limited body of literature that is a theoretical discussion about professional social worker identity development and self-reflection in clinical social work education, a portion of the discussion focuses on social identity development and professional social worker identity development. Social Identity Development may be one area of overlap in the clinical social work education process between professional social work identity development and personal development. As I discussed in the self-reflection in social work education section above, the Council for Social Work Education's Accreditation Standards (2008) include reflecting on one's personal biases as integral to social work education. Miller and Garran (2008) describe Social Identity Development Phases according to targeted aspects of identity and agent aspects of identity. Target identity refers to an aspect of identity that corresponds with social oppression, and agent identity refers to an aspect of identity that corresponds with unearned privilege. Miller and Garran (2008) describe the crucial influence that social

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identity development plays in professional identity development, and recommend that

helping professionals reflect on the social identity development phases:

> If we can situate and position ourselves by reflecting on our social identity, we are more likely to have a sense of self-awareness and less likely to act out our prejudices unconsciously or to think and behave in a way that meets our own identity needs rather than responding to those of our clients. (p. 130).

Miehls (2001) examines more specifically the interface between racial identity

development and professional identity development. The author highlights that social

work students are challenged to reflect on their identity when they come into contact with

an "other", whether it be a client in field placement or a student in the classroom, and

students, especially white students, often do not reflect on aspects of identity, such as

race, until they are put in situations where they are forced to examine who they are.

Miller and Garran (2008) and Miehls (2001) establish that although the path of

social identity development/ racial identity development that many social work students

experience is not linear, both people of color and white people undergo a kind of self-

actualization process. The authors describe social identity development in the context of

self-reflection and intergroup dialogue, but I did not find research that gathers first hand

accounts from social work students regarding the degree to which they reflect on their

social identity development individually and with others, or if they do reflect on their

social identity, how this change process affects students in the context of their personal

lives and relationships outside of social work school.

Related studies on the impact of psychotherapists' jobs on their personal lives

In gathering background literature, I found no existing research that gathers the

voices of social work students or of social workers regarding their overall training

process and experience of entering the field of social work. Limited studies have been

conducted of psychology doctorate students, and of practicing psychotherapists that

inquire about the possible positive and negative effects of practicing clinical work on

psychotherapists' identities, behaviors, and relationships. In 1983, Farber interviewed 60

psychotherapists to investigate the effects of psychotherapeutic practice on therapists'

self-perception, cognitive style, and interpersonal functioning. Farber (1983) confirmed

his hypothesis that practicing psychotherapy does indeed affect individuals' behaviors

and self-identity. Therapists he surveyed indicated their own increased psychological-

mindedness, self-awareness, and self-assurance, along with increased self-disclosing

ability, openness, and increased sensitivity. Participants reported the changes in

themselves due to practicing psychotherapy as more positive than negative, and that the

changes they experience in themselves are the same changes they seek to engender in

their clients. Farber (1983) collects direct accounts from psychotherapists regarding the

effects of practicing psychotherapy on their personal lives, yet he does not track the

number of years these therapists have been in practice and when they experienced these

areas of growth in themselves. One wonders when, after entering the field of clinical

work, the individuals interviewed experienced these changes in themselves.

Therapists also reported that therapeutic work often leaves them with too little

time or energy for family and outside interests. In addition, the research indicated that,

"many psychotherapists adopt the psychotherapeutic perspective in which they operate

eight to ten hours a day as a relatively immutable cognitive style" (Farber, 1983, p. 180).

Therapists use therapeutic constructs to structure their perceptions of self and others,

analyze peoples' motives, distortions, and inner experiences, and they experience this

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psychological-mindedness as a "double-edged sword". Therapists are ambivalent about

the value of psychological-mindedness. They value the perspective for creating increased

insight and awareness of self and others in their personal lives. It is "seen by therapists as

greatly enhancing interpersonal relationships, adding depth, subtlety, nuance, and irony to

the understanding and appreciation of others" (Farber, 1983, p. 174). In 1987, Guy

stated, "Unless psychotherapists take frequent inventory of the impact of their clinical

practice on their emotional well-being and interpersonal functioning, they are likely to be

affected in ways outside of both their awareness and control" (p. 141). The research of

Farber (1983) and Guy (1987) brings to light the both positive and negative impact that

practicing clinical work may have on psychotherapists, establishes patterns in which this

impact manifests, and suggests the importance of psychotherapists maintaining awareness

of this potential impact on their personal lives. If it is important for psychotherapists to

maintain awareness of how their profession is impacting their personal life, then it is

reasonable to assume that it is important for new clinicians to practice self-awareness in

the same regard. It may be useful to gather narrative data from clinicians at all stages of

their career, including the perspectives of students, which is what I intend to do with

thesis project.

Related Studies on the impact of psychotherapists' jobs on their partner relationships

Guy (1987) developed a description of the effects of clinical practice more

specifically on relationships with significant others. Clinicians reported positive effects

of their jobs on their relationships due to the personal growth they experience, some

examples are: improved ability to relate to spouse, increased vulnerability, openness,

tolerance, acceptance, patience, etc. On the contrary, liabilities of therapists' jobs on

relationships included emotional depletion, social withdrawal, and inappropriate psychological-mindedness. Constantly interpreting behavior of a partner reduces mutuality, increases partner's defensiveness, and intimacy has potential to become emotionless and intellectualized (Guy, 1987). Guy (1987) reminds psychotherapists that they must place their personal life and intimate relationships as top priority. Because therapists spend so much time engaged in one-way intimacy, rarely having appropriate opportunities to self-disclose information, a therapist needs non-sublimated forms of intimacy to provide a corrective balance. Clark (2002) collected data on communication across home/work borders for people in a wide array of different forms of employment, and found that the more people communicated about work at home and home at work, the more functional and satisfied they were in both. Therapists can communicate a limited amount about their home life at work (depending on their work environment), and there are limits on what they can communicate about their work life at home, thus, psychic isolation creates unique challenges for therapists in this regard (Guy, 1987). I was unable to find research that examines the transition for psychotherapy students to practicing this limited communication between home and work.

McGinnes (2007) conducted a study on the effect of therapists' jobs on their relationships; she conducting a total of twelve interviews with both therapists and their partners, completing six interviews with therapists, and six interviews with therapists' partners. Findings were that therapists valued their use of self-reflection in their relationships. Most partners said that they valued therapist partners' insight. Some partners preferred that therapist partners do not bring their skill set into relationships unless asked to. The author concluded by recommending that more research be done

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collecting data from the perspective of therapists' partners. She pointed out that gathering perspectives of therapists' partners could help therapists to gain awareness of positive and negative effects of their clinical work on the people who surround them in their non-work life (McGinnes, 2007). Farber (1983), Guy (1987), and McGinnes (2007) all gather narrative data from psychotherapists in regards to how practicing psychotherapy may affect their personal lives and relationships. These authors did not consider how clinical education and training may affect students' personal lives and relationships, or, more specifically, how clinical social work students experience their education and training.

Help Seeking among Psychotherapists

Mackey (1994) interviewed 15 experienced clinicians to explore the connection between personal psychotherapy and clinical social work professional development. Through content analysis, the author uncovered 5 themes discussed in the interviews: therapist as model, enhancement of empathy, understanding the therapeutic process, self-awareness, and personal and professional development.

Siebert and Siebert (2005, 2007) conducted quantitative studies investigating the connections among help seeking professionals' (medicine, nursing, psychology, social work) levels of distress, frequency of seeking help, and levels of caregiver role identity. Helping professionals who rated highly on characteristics of caregiver role identity: perfectionism, needing approval, and feeling highly responsible for clients were more vulnerable to impairment and less likely to seek help than those with lower role identity scores (Siebert and Siebert, 2005). Siebert and Siebert (2007) also found that having a clinical license improved practitioners likelihood of seeking

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help, and the authors posited that seeking help could become a particular threat to new helping professionals' idealized images of themselves as professional caregivers. I was unable to find any research examining clinical social work students' use of personal psychotherapy or help seeking tendencies. Although it is not a requirement for clinical social work students to engage in personal psychotherapy, it may be useful information, given that clinical social work students are training to take on a psychotherapeutic role, to learn about if, when, and how clinical social work students use personal psychotherapy.

Summary

The review of the literature revealed that the impact of clinical social work education on the personal lives of social work students has not yet been studied. Related research has dealt primarily with the impact of therapists' jobs on their personal lives and relationships. These studies collect personal accounts through interviews with psychotherapists regarding how practicing clinical work has both negatively and positively affected their lives and relationships, and the studies highlight the importance of psychotherapists' reflection on and discussion with loved ones regarding impact of clinical practice, to avoid potentially negative effects of the job (Guy, 1987).

Research focused on social work education has primarily taken the form of a theoretical discussion regarding the intersections among professional identity development, social identity development, and self-reflection in social work education. The majority of authors agree that reflective practice is essential to social work education and practice (Heron, 2005; Lam, C., Wong, H., & Leung, T., 2006; Clare, 2007). Although, Yip (2005) does not disagree that reflective practice is necessary to social work education, the author cautions that under inappropriate conditions, i.e. lack of

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appropriate supervision or agency support, this self-reflection can be damaging to the professional and self-development of social work students.

Among the research regarding professional identity development and reflective practice in social work education, few studies based their research on the collection of students' reflective process, and these studies focused on specific aspects of the education process, i.e. field placement or the classroom (Lam et al., 2006, Clare, 2007). In collecting students' reflective journals regarding field placement, Lam et al. (2006) highlighted that students often wrote about their identity, and a search for self when they were faced with distressing situations with their clients. Clare (2007) revealed a pattern of students often writing about becoming more tolerant of a general ambiguity and not knowing.

There are research findings that suggest that practicing psychotherapy does affect therapists' behavior and self-identity (Farber, 1983). And, there are research articles that imply that professional social work identity development may be a significant and sometimes transformative personal process for clinical social work students, intertwining with their social identity development and personal development (Miehls, 2001). Clinical social work students conduct psychotherapy as part of their training while they are also in the process of developing a professional clinical social work identity. I intend to interview recent graduates from clinical social work programs, and to carry out a theme analysis using the narrative data, to hopefully reveal common themes of growth and/or disturbance in personal development and intimate relationships in relation to clinical social work education and training.

After concluding a review of the literature, I have constructed an interview guide on which to base these interviews. The interview guide includes questions regarding the following 4 themes: observed changes in self and identity, use of self-reflection during the clinical social work education process, observed impact on intimate relationships, and use of personal psychotherapy during the clinical social work education process (see Appendix B). Gathering first hand accounts of clinical social work education and training programs from individuals who have recently completed the experience may be useful to clinical social work students, clinical social workers, and educators in increasing awareness concerning the potential personal impact of the education and training process; and thus, may be informative to the self which is an indispensable tool in clinical social work practice.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore how clinical social work education and training impacts the personal lives and relationships of individuals who go through this educational process. I conducted a qualitative, inductive, exploratory study, and I used a flexible methods design in order to gather the direct perspectives of recent graduates from clinical social work programs regarding the effects of this education and training on their personal lives as they understand it. In order to collect narrative data for this study, I asked participants a series of open-ended questions (the interview guide is attached as Appendix B). I then used a content analysis of the narrative data to highlight and discuss common themes that emerged from these first hand interviews.

This study is an inductive study, operated under the assumption that data can pave the way for theory. A review of the literature in the previous chapter of this paper revealed that the majority of research that has been carried out thus far related to the topic of the impact of clinical social work education on students and recent graduates is a collection of theoretical papers (Yip, 2005; Heron, 2005). There have been a very limited number of qualitative studies conducted taking into consideration the first hand experience of individuals who go through the education process (Man Lam, Wong, Leung, 2006; Clare, 2007). An inductive flexible methods design fits this research question well because conducting interviews comprised of open-ended questions provides the opportunity for gathering rich accounts of participants' personal

experiences, and extracting themes that may not have been brought to light in previous research (Anastas, 1999).

<p align="center">*Sample*</p>

I interviewed 10 individuals who have graduated from a social work masters' program with a concentration in clinical social work. I interviewed individuals who graduated within the previous two years prior to the collection of data for the study, so that participants' would have some perspective on the experience of social work education, while the experience would continue to be fresh in their minds. I used a convenience, snowball sample for this study to gather participants for interviewing. I was able to recruit my sample through my professional and personal connections because I am currently a clinical social work student. I sent out a mass email to teachers, supervisors, colleagues, peers, and requested that they forward my recruitment letter to anyone they knew who fit the criteria to be a participant (See Appendix C). I received several responses accordingly, and I received the rest of my participants as a result of the individuals who I did interview, forwarding my request to their personal and professional contacts. I arranged all of my interviews through email. I emailed my participants individually in reply to their email responses, clarifying the inclusion criteria, the purpose of the study, and the nature of participation. I then spoke to some participants on the phone to clarify directions to meeting locations.

I attempted to increase the diversity of the sample by stating in my mass email that I intended to interview a diverse sample racially and gender wise. I also emailed my request for participation to the Latino Social Worker Organization, and the National Association of Black Social Workers, through the National Association of Social

Workers. However, through snowball sampling, the sample turned out to include 10 females and 0 males. Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 34 years old. Racially, 9 participants identified as White, 1 as Asian American, and ethnically, 4 participants identified as Jewish, 1 as Jewish and Irish Catholic, 1 as Irish American, and 4 as White. Although this racial and ethnic diversity did add richness to the research findings, the sample remained homogeneous. The requirements for inclusion in the samples were that participants must have graduated from a social work masters' program within two years of data collection for this study. Participants could be white or of color and identify however they choose according to gender or sexual orientation.

Ethics and Safeguards

I took the following measures to protect confidentiality. I requested that each participant sign an informed consent form before beginning an interview. Please see Appendix A for an example of the letter of consent that each interviewee was asked to read and sign. I also provided a space to attend to any questions or concerns regarding the use of the information before beginning an interview. The final data is discussed and presented in such a way that it cannot be associated with participants, disguising quoted comments and individual stories.

To ensure that the interview data remained confidential, I used coded numbers to organize the information, and kept signed informed consent forms separate from completed audiotapes. My research advisor will have access to the data absent of identifying information, and she will be the only person other than myself who may see the data. The informed consent forms, recordings, and transcriptions were stored in a locked drawer during the thesis project, and they will remain there for three years,

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consistent with Federal regulations. The recordings will remain secured after this time until they are no longer needed and will then be destroyed.

Data Collection

For this qualitative study, I collected narrative data through individual interviews. The interviews lasted a duration of 20 to 40 minutes. I began each interview with a series of demographic questions. I asked participants to identify their age, and to describe how they identified gender wise, racially, and ethnically. Collecting this demographic data made it possible to document and discuss any connections between demographic variables of participants and themes developed in the content analysis. After I asked these demographic questions, I asked participants a series of open-ended questions in order to gather the direct experiences of how social work education and training affected their personal lives and relationships. (Please see the interview guide included as Appendix B). This flexible methods technique was useful in that it provided interviewees the opportunity to describe in their own words the phenomena being explored in this research study. Because participants were sharing detailed accounts of their personal experiences and intimate relationships, I reminded them of protections taken around confidentiality, and that they had the option of choosing not to answer any questions, to withdraw from the study if they felt moved to do so.

Data Analysis

I audio recorded the 10 interviews with a digital recorder and I personally transcribed all of the interviews. After transcribing the interviews, I conducted a content analysis, organizing the narrative data by common patterns that emerged, assigning a code to each theme. I highlighted the data within each theme with a different color

highlighter, and then condensed the data to describe these patterns in the findings, and to include pertinent quotes from the interviews. The frequency of the patterns that emerged across the interviews to create themes increased the validity of this study's findings (Anastas, 1999).

Biases

Conducting a flexible methods study allowed for my personal biases to enter into this project. There is a possibility that during interviews, I may have verbally or non-verbally encouraged participants to elaborate on material that entertained my personal interest in this study. There is also a possibility that my biases may have influenced the interpretation of findings within the discussion chapter of this work.

I am currently participating in a clinical social work graduate program, and I developed interest in carrying out this study because I have experienced an increase in the depth and frequency of reflecting on myself and on my relationships, and I have observed personal growth in myself and a shift in my personal relationships. Not only do I attribute these changes to my clinical social work education, but I have also engaged in several informal conversations with fellow students who have also experienced changes in their personal lives that they attribute to this experience. I began the process of carrying out this study expecting that interview participants would have experienced some degree of change in themselves that they attribute to clinical social work education and training, such as developed self-awareness. I also expected to find that these changes in participants caused some degree of confusion, disruption, or growth in their personal relationships, particularly with their most intimate relationships.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

A content analysis of narrative data revealed several patterns in participants' responses to the interview questions for this qualitative study of the impact of clinical social work education on recent graduates' personal lives and relationships. The first four sections of this chapter display findings that correspond with the study's interview questions. These themes are: the impact of clinical social work education on the self, self-reflection in clinical social work education, self-reflection and racial identity in clinical social work education, and the impact of clinical social work education on partner relationships. Within the four sections that follow, the theme of therapy and clinical social work students is based on an interview question, while the remaining three themes emerged in the course of the data analysis process. These themes are: the impact of clinical social work education on relating, the overlap of professional social work values and identity development and personal values and development, and reflections of participants on entering the field of social work.

The findings for this study were gathered through interviews conducted with 10 individuals who graduated from clinical social work school within the previous two years. All of the participants identified as female, and 9 out of 10 identified as Caucasian, while one participant identified as Asian American. 8 out of 10 participants got their Clinical Social Work education and training at Smith College, while the other 2 participants got their education and training at Boston College. Because the majority of

the narrative data was gathered from interviews with Smith graduates, the findings may be more representative of experience of clinical social work education and training through Smith College specifically, which bases it's curriculum on more of a psychodynamic orientation than other clinical social work programs.

Impact of Clinical Social Work Education on Self

In response to the question, "Have you experienced any changes in yourself that you attribute to clinical social work education and training, and if so how?" all of the participants commented on their increased level of self-awareness or self-understanding. One participant stated, "I consider myself a fairly self-aware person, but this is a whole new level of self-awareness that I gained in social work school." In addition, 6 out of 10 participants used words such as increased confidence, happiness, insight, assertiveness, and strength to describe growth in themselves that they relate to social work education and training. One participant commented, that social work education, "really strengthened my sense of self and how I am capable of handling much more that I ever thought that I was able to handle, whether it was in my personal life or on the job." Another participant stated, "There is a way that I think that I got very strong as an individual in social work school in a way that I hadn't before." While another participant said, "I feel like I've found my voice over the last couple of years." One participant commented that she attributed an increased feeling of agency in her life to her social work education, she stated, "I think you become a lot more aware of your own thought processes and your own feelings, and how that affects the way you interact with the world versus maybe just seeing the world as interacting with you." On a different note, one participant described a new appreciation for certain parts of herself, "I think that in

the process there's been this way that I've come to value the parts of me that are more vulnerable or sensitive and dependent."

5 of 10 participants in the study used words such as heightened, magnified, or intense to describe the period of time when they were attending social work school. One participant described how she observed this intensity to affect her and her peers, "I think because of the intensity of school, we get sucked into thinking that everything we say is so important, this is what the theory says, and this is what it should look like." Another participant described social work school as "a very selfish self-reflective time, sort of like, 'your problems aren't as big because you're not struggling with your racism.'"

One participant commented that while she was a social work student, she struggled with pathologizing herself. She stated, "You can start pathologizing yourself, you can start ruminating on stuff…We all have those traits, moments when we are splitting off, and it's all magnified when you're in social work school." Some participants also commented that the financial stress that social work education caused for them negatively impacted their personal lives.

In response to this interview question, in contrast with the above responses that describe the impact of clinical social work education on the self in a personal sense, two participants' focused in their responses on how clinical social work education affected their professional lives. One participant stated, "In terms of the way I identified myself in the world, choosing a profession was a really great thing for me in terms of feeling that I found an identity as a professional." The other participant stated, "I guess it inevitably overlaps for me with decisions about my professional development."

Self-Reflection in Clinical Social Work Education

In response questioning participants more specifically about their experience of self-reflection in clinical social work education, most of the participants in this study responded that as a result of this education process, they self-reflect more, and better, smarter, or more compassionately. One person stated, "I found that I could self-reflect in a much more kind and compassionate way for myself…I could see my own self-critical thinking, because I had learned so much about why people are so self-critical, how that happens, and why that's not helpful." Another said, "I feel like my self-reflection is more compassionate, more mindful, and deeper than anything that could have been attained without the knowledge that I have now."

Some participants in this study commented that their self-reflection process during clinical social work school was frustrating, hard, or painful. One person said, "I think that the process of getting to these places can be very painful…When you are going through a process like that and it's new, you can feel lost in it…you are trying to find your way…to some kind of realization…that's not easy."

The outliers of the responses to this interview question were three participants who provided shorter responses, stating that they self reflect more, or that self-reflection has made them more aware and more thoughtful.

Self-Reflection and Racial Identity in Clinical Social Work Education

5 of 10 participants in this study commented on their experience of self-reflecting on their racial identity during clinical social work education. Several of these comments were stated in response to the interview question inquiring about participants' experience of self-reflection in clinical social work education. One white participant stated, "I

certainly felt very race conscious at Smith in a way that I didn't always think felt productive personally", while another white participant stated, "At social work school it was really hard falling into all the privileged categories…but it's been very helpful to struggle with it…I guess it was really worth it." Three more white participants commented that reflecting on their racial identity helped them to change the way they think and interact with the world. One of these women said, "I thought about race a lot before and studied about race, but I hadn't looked inside in the way that I was forced to at Smith…knowing when I have racist thoughts or unfounded fears based on race." One participant who does not identify as white commented on her experience of her racial identity during social work school. She stated:

> I would go through phases when I was like, I don't like how it's so white here, and I don't like how other people make assumptions about who I am and where I'm from, and other times I was like, this is great because people are curious and their interested for the right reasons and I am being forced to commit to what is important to me.

Two participants in the study also stated that exposing their children to racial diversity became of increasing importance after attending social work school. "It's very important to me to expose my children to diverse communities and to be asking these questions…that's always been important to me, but now it 's even more important to me."

Impact of Clinical Social Work Education on Partner Relationships

Among the ten participants interviewed for this study, five participants were in partner relationships that began before social work school, two participants were in partner relationships that were established during social work school, two participants ended long term partner relationships during social work school, and one participant was

single during social work school.   The interview question, "How has clinical social work education and training impacted your partner relationship if you have one?" created a variety of responses. A few participants noted that social work education and training enhanced their partner relationships. One participant stated, "I think there are ways that our relationship has improved because of what I learned in social work school." Another participant described how social work education has benefited her relationship, she commented:

> Being exposed to these intense emotions and stories, I think, has made me on a regular basis much more emotional and vulnerable than I was as a graphic designer. And I think it's been helpful because I know he can handle that. He sort of sees my more vulnerable sides and still appreciates me. I think it has brought us closer. I am hoping that we have a life long relationship, and this stuff would come out eventually, so in a sense it is out there already and we're learning how to deal with it. That's probably a good way to start the relationship.

Five participants commented on the level of stress that clinical social work education can put on students' partner relationships, or described ways in which the education process puts stress on student's partner relationships. One participant whose relationship withstood the education process stated, "I've seen a lot of stress on students' relationships. Some of it is kind of comical I guess because it is so extreme." Three participants commented that during clinical social work education they wanted their partners to be working on certain issues that they were working on. One participant said, "I wanted him to be struggling with his racism so that we were both in the same place." The same participants and two other participants commented that the ways they used their partners for emotional support during social work school contributed to the level of stress on their relationship. One participant commented, "I would unload on him all my anxieties and fears", while another participant stated, "my own issues just bubbled to the

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top and there was no way to really protect him from that." One participant described in more detail:

> He is probably the one person who I feel the safest with in terms of pushing buttons, so I would push him a lot, and make him talk a lot about things that he didn't necessarily want to talk about. Or, I'd go into things to the nth degree because I needed to work things out for myself, and I needed to work things out through our relationship…So, I've never felt like I couldn't talk with him about the things that were prompted by what I was learning at school, but I had to choose my timing well, and I had to be sensitive that just because I am going through something doesn't mean that he's going though it, or that he wants to go through it right now.

The above participants, who described the ways that clinical social work education contributed stress to their partner relationship, remain in the same partner relationships post-graduation. A few participants in the study commented that they had observed it to be fairly common for long-term partner relationships to end during clinical social work school. Two participants ended their long-term partner relationships while attending clinical social work school, and described their personal growth as a contributing factor to their break-ups. One participant stated, "I grew a lot and my partner was behind me, or just different, behind sounds judgmental. I think it was not the right relationship for me, and I hadn't been strong enough before to end it." The other participant who had ended her partner relationship stated, "What happened was that my self-confidence was boosted and it tipped the scales in the relationship…I felt like I had a different understanding of things, I woke up from a deep sleep, I could see things very clearly and differently than he could."

The one participant that was single during her clinical social work education and training noted, "Although I wanted to date, I felt like there wasn't time, and I was too sapped of energy to put energy into the dating realm."

Impact of Clinical Social Work on Relating

The question, "How has clinical social work education and training impacted your partner relationship?" created many comments on the theme of how clinical social work education and training has impacted participants' general relating to other people. In fact, participants who did not comment on the affect of their education and training on their partner relationships, moved directly to commenting on their relating to others in general. Two of the participants in the study commented that social work education has contributed to improving certain relationships in their lives. One person stated, "I feel like some relationships were really strengthened as a result of my newfound self-awareness and understanding of psychology." Another person stated, "With my sister, I think that it has deepened our conversations, and with my friends, the same thing. Superficially, if I look at how our relationships have changed, I think it has made us more able to talk about feelings." Two participants described in more detail how clinical social work education has affected their relating with others. One participant stated, "Before, relationships felt somewhat unsafe in terms of how do you resolve conflict, or how do you understand if a person is unavailable. And I think now that I have the tools and practice, it feels less personal if something comes up." The other participant who elaborated further commented on how she notices her skill set entering her interactions:

> I think I challenge my relationships a bit more. If someone says something that I think is inappropriate or that I think deserves probing, then I probe. And it's not necessarily in my nature to do that. I have a more difficult time tolerating people saying things that have a lot of meaning and then brushing over it like it's nothing. And I think I take a lot of what I learned in practice, like I try to be empathetic, and I try to meet people where they are at, so I am not so pushing and grating on people.

4 out of 10 participants in this study commented that clinical social work education and training helped them to set healthy boundaries with their family members. One participant stated, "Through Smith I kind of channeled what I wanted to do into the appropriate arena. So, I've been able to sort of not be therapist to my family. I have appropriate boundaries now, and that's really made a big difference in my life." Another participant commented, "It's really helped me to make certain decisions about setting boundaries with my family, how to have healthy relationships with them, and what kind of relationships I wanted with them." Also, a few participants in the study commented that they are much more likely to recommend people in their personal lives to go to therapy, for example, one participant stated, "I find myself pushing her and anyone I know to go into therapy in a way that I hadn't done before."

9 of 10 participants in the study made a statement in regards to whether or not they therapize or want to therapize the people in their personal lives. 6 of 10 participants commented that they avoided therapizing family and friends and tried to keep home and work separate. One participant commented, "I really don't want to bring therapy into my relationship or into my family of origin. I don't think anyone is good at analyzing their families, or picking the origins of conflict in their families. I really want to keep it separate." Another person commented, "Something that I try really hard to do is to not take that on for him (partner) in the same way that I would for a therapy client. Like holding his sadness, or taking on his burdens." Another participant stated, "I think I am less inclined to analyze people and to think about people from a psychological standpoint because I need some separation between work and life." 4 of 10 participants commented that the amount of listening that they did at work caused them to grow tired of listening to

people in their personal lives. For example, one participant said, "I feel sort of exhausted

about asking people questions about how they are doing. I just shut it off on the

weekends. I think it's a learning process of making sure that I'm there for the people in

my personal life like I'm there for my clients."

Another student articulates several ways in which social work education

and training was disruptive to her relating to others. Among these interferences she

observed that her analytical thoughts of others were interfering with her social

interaction. She commented:

> I remember trying to interact with people and feeling silenced by my work,
> because I was hearing all of these profound experiences…I think that first year in
> social work school they teach you that you are supposed to be a little bit of a
> blank slate, you're supposed to let other people talk and project onto you what
> they need to project onto you so that you can then work on that with them, but I
> felt almost like I was taught to not have a voice and that kind of transferred into
> my life during school. I'd go to a party and I wouldn't be able to talk the way that
> I used to be able to talk, like I didn't want to talk about clients, I didn't want to
> talk about my work, and people didn't want to hear about my work. Then, also
> people would accuse me of analyzing them, and I'd think no I'm not analyzing
> you, wait, yeah, I am analyzing you, and I can't help it.

5 out of 10 participants in the study commented on changes they observed in how

others perceived, responded to, or used them after they entered clinical social work

school. A few participants commented that family and friends asked them for advice, a

few participants noted that people worried that participants analyzed them, and a few

participants stated that they experienced both of these two phenomenon coming from

people in their personal lives. One participant stated, "When I told people that I was a

social worker or therapist, they wanted me to analyze their problems or they wanted

advice, and I really didn't want to take that role. Other people got freaked out and

thought that I was going to analyze them. I felt that I was cast in the listening role."

In response to the interview question inquiring about the possible affects of clinical social work education and training on participant's partner relationships, two participants expressed that they didn't experience their education and training as having very significantly affect this aspect of their lives. One participant stated, "Less so than I hear from other people. I guess no that much," and another person stated, "No, I don't feel that I use any techniques with him (her partner)."

Therapy and Clinical Social Work Students

There are a number of themes that emerged in coding participants' responses to the question, "What is your own experience with therapy, and has it changed since attending clinical social work school?" Half of the participants in this study cited their own personal psychotherapy as an influential factor in why they chose to go to clinical social work school. One participant stated, "I had a therapist before I went to social work school, and she was one of a few people who inspired me to pursue this path." All of the participants had attended therapy at some point in their lives. Half of the participants commented on how useful or important psychotherapy is for clinical social work students or clinical social workers, both commenting on their own benefit from psychotherapy and identifying reasons why it is important for clinical social work students. One participant stated, "I think that in order to be really good at self-reflecting and knowing what's going on in the room, I feel like you have to get your own counseling." Two other participants commented that it is important to experience being in the position of the client in order to be an effective therapist. Also, two participants commented that they felt that they needed personal psychotherapy. One person stated, "I find that when I am taking care of other people too much, I have dreams where I act out so that people take care of me. I

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realized I need something in my life that I was being actively cared for in a way that I can't ask of my husband or my family."

A few participants noted that therapy is taboo or not taboo in their family of origin. One participant stated, "I come from a family where the idea of therapy is preposterous, and only crazy, crazy people go to therapy. You do not think about your feelings, you do not talk about your feelings because that is strange." Another participant commented, "If I told my mother to go to therapy, she would say, 'What is a therapist going to do for me, I'll pay them money, and they'll talk to me, and then what are they going to do for me."

6 out of 10 participants commented that during or after clinical social work school, in their personal psychotherapy they were observing or learning, in a professional sense, from their therapist, and a few participants expressed concern that this observation could disrupt their therapy. One participant stated, "Therapy is a great opportunity to watch somebody else in action with the added complication that I am the client." Another person stated, "Sometimes I feel particularly aware of what my therapist must be experiencing, but I can't let that interfere."

A few participants expressed an appreciation for their increased transparency in their own therapy. One participant stated, "It's so different to be in therapy with this transparency about what's actually going on in the room. To know about transference and countertransference and to realize that my content is avoiding my process. It is so much easier to be in therapy now." Another participant commented:

> Before I went to social work school, I knew intuitively that she was good at what she did, and that she spoke a language that made sense to me, and when I was learning at social work school, I realized what that was. So, I was able to put a

name on the type of therapy that she was doing with me, which was pretty cool because I thought, I'm informed in this now, I'm not just walking around in the dark in my therapy.

Also, a few participants commented that they had developed more assertiveness in their own therapy. One participant stated, "I was able to call my therapist out on, 'I think this may be your own issue.'" Another participant commented, "Before I would think, 'well she's the expert, so even though I don't agree with this, I have to go along with it'…where as now after my training, I am more likely to say, 'I feel like we're stuck right now.'"

So, in response to the question, "What is your own experience with therapy, and how has it changed since attending clinical social work school?" participants commented on the usefulness and importance of attending therapy as a clinical social work student, their own need for therapy as a new social worker, and their tendencies to observe, learn from, and experience increased transparency in their personal psychotherapy.

Overlap of Professional Social Work and Personal Values and Development

The question, "Have you experienced changes in yourself that you attribute to your clinical social work education and training, and if so how?" also created several responses highlighting an overlap of the professional and the personal in participants' values and development. Two participants commented on the impact of social justice in social work on their personal values. One participant commented, "A commitment to social justice and looking at the way the environment effects people were things that I could no longer pick and choose in terms of how I thought about the world." Another participant stated that social work education helped her to "develop a professional identity, but also a personal identity and how I live my life. I try to be balanced, healthy,

and have functional relationships." One participant described in more detail an overlapping professional and personal development process:

> What happened for me was that social work school in and of itself was very therapeutic, and it was an intense type of therapy that I could have never gotten doing it once a week on an outpatient basis, and I felt like the program that I was involved with at Smith was very psychodynamically oriented, which part of that is sort of looking deep into yourself and being very self-reflective and understanding your psyche and how it operates first from a Freudian perspective, moving through different theories all the way to postmodernism. Based on that I had a whole new language to understand my own thoughts and behaviors and those of people around me. It really helped me to frame my past existence and experience and also what I was currently living.

Three participants mentioned a development in language and vocabulary through social work school that affected their way of thinking and speaking in daily life. One person stated "Certainly, I have the language for things now that I didn't have before. I have a sort of special, insider knowledge that I am walking around with." Or, another said, "all of a sudden there were feeling words in my vocabulary when I was talking with my family." Two participants also commented on their minds being trained by social work education in a way that infiltrates their daily lives, for example, "I think there is a way in which my brain has been trained a bit to really take a situation and start thinking about the context for both myself and for other people." Another participant stated:

> Looking at everything from all angles is really valued in social work school. I am committed to always being aware that everything is five sided, things aren't black and white; everyone has their own subjective experience. I was exposed to postmodern theory in social work school and I have totally internalized it and live by it. That is my working model for the world. My mind is trained to be respectful and responsive to multiple perspectives, and that is something that I was exposed to in social work school.

Three participants cited specific aspects of social work education and training that contributed to their personal development. One participant cited supervision as a

medium for personal growth while two participants commented specifically on how their

cohort during social work school aided their personal growth. One participant stated,

"being with a group of people who I felt like knew me very well, helped me to self-reflect

because they could sort of mirror a lot of positive things back to me." And another

commented, "I had never been surrounded by so many women who were so impressive,

and been in an environment that was so holding for me to do all this growing, and enter

my later 20s into my 30s, to be an adult woman."

While 6 out of 10 participants did comment on a connection between their

personal and professional values and development, 4 out of 10 participants did not

explicitly draw a connection of this kind during the course of their interviews.

Reflections on Entering the Field of Social Work

Some of the participants in the study commented on their experience, the

struggles and rewards, of working in the field of social work thus far. One participant

commented, "Some days, I wish that I didn't know what I know or have to see the world

the way I see it, but other days I think, "Wow, this really reinforces why I like working

with people…it's stimulating.'" Another participant commented, "I find myself angrier

sometimes at the hopelessness of the systems our clients have to deal with, and that

makes me want to ignore it and go in the other direction, but I don't really want to do that

because, yeah, I want to change it."

A few of participants commented that they felt that they had learned and/or grown

more since they had finished their social work education and training. One participant

commented:

Lately, I've been learning about myself through the work. It feels good to see growth happen, it is sort of where I wanted to be in this field, like know that my clients change me and I change them, the mutual influence. I can really feel it lately, which I couldn't feel as much when I was an intern because I was so 'kerfuffled' by my own anxiety, worrying about doing everything right.

Summary

The previous chapter outlined the findings of this study which were divided into the following sections: the impact of clinical social work on the self, self-reflection in clinical social work education, self-reflection and racial identity in clinical social work education, the impact of clinical social work education on partner relationships, the impact of clinical social work education on relating, therapy for social work students, the overlap of professional social work and personal values and development, and reflections on entering the field of social work.

Major findings were that most participants experienced self-reported personal growth as a result of their clinical social work education, while some participants also experienced the process of social work education as stressful or as causing stress for their relationships or to their relating to others. The outliers for this study were those participants who commented that clinical social work education had a minimal impact on their personal development or on their relationships to others in their personal lives. The findings for this study may be more representative of the experience of graduates from Smith College School for Social Work, than representative of clinical social work graduate students in general, given that 8 of 10 participants in this study attended Smith College School for Social Work. The following chapter will discuss these findings in relation to the central issues of this study, to previous work in the subject area, and to clinical social work practice.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of clinical social work education on individuals who go through the educational process and on their personal relationships. This chapter examines the relationship of the findings to previous work in the subject area. This chapter also calls attention to the limitations of this study, as well as to areas for future research inspired by this study. The chapter concludes by highlighting the implications of this research for clinical social work practice.

This study gathered first-hand accounts from recent graduates from clinical social work master's programs, through individual interviews, regarding how clinical social work education impacted their personal lives and relationships. The findings show that most participants in this study attribute personal growth to their clinical education and training, while some participants also experienced clinical social work education as internally stressful, stressful to their partner relationships, or stressful to their partner relationships. A minority of participants in this study did not observe clinical social work education to be the impetus of significant change or to put substantial stress on their personal lives or on their relationships.

The discussion of the relationship of the findings to previous research and literature is divided into the following sections: the impact of clinical social work education on the self, on partner relationships, and on relating; self-reflection in clinical

social work education; self-reflection and racial identity in clinical social work education; and therapy and clinical social work education.

Impact of Clinical Social Work Education on the Self, on Partner Relationships,

And on Relating

All of the participants in this study commented that they attribute an increased level of self-awareness or self-understanding to their clinical social work education, and participants used words such as increased insight, assertiveness, openness and vulnerability to describe growth in themselves that they relate to their social work education. These findings are similar to the findings of Farber (1983) who interviewed psychotherapists to gather narrative data regarding how psychotherapists' jobs affect their behavior and self-identity. The therapists who Farber (1983) surveyed indicated their own increased self-awareness, self-assurance, along with increased self-disclosing ability, openness, and increased sensitivity as a result of practicing psychotherapy.

However, some participants in this study also described having experienced a significant shift in their level of confidence, happiness, or strength that they relate to their clinical social work education, and that Farber (1983) did not gather in his above study of the affect of therapists' jobs. One participant described feeling an increased level of agency in her life, "I think you become a lot more aware of your own thought processes and your own feelings, and how that affects the way you interact with the world versus maybe just seeing the world as interacting with you." Some participants in this study also used words such as, heightened, magnified, intense, or selfish to describe the time period when they were in clinical social work school. The differences between the findings of this research project and of Farber's (1983) study might be a reflection of the different

stages in career of the two groups of participants; Farber (1983) interviewed established psychotherapists, while I interviewed individuals who graduated from clinical social work school within the previous two years.

The majority of participants' comments in this study on the impact of clinical social work education on their partner relationships also do not reflect Guy's (1987) study of the affect of psychotherapists' jobs on their partner relationships. The majority of participants in this study commented on the level of stress that clinical social work school added to their partner relationship because during social work school participants would require lots of validation from their partners, need to verbally process with their partner what they were grappling with in school, or desire that their partners be struggling with whatever they were struggling with. Guy (1987) found that clinicians reported more positive effects of their jobs on their relationships due to the personal growth they experience, such as: improved ability to relate to spouse, tolerance, acceptance, patience, etc. It is possible that the differing findings between the study that Guy (1987) conducted, and this study can also be partially attributed to different stages in career between the groups of participants who were interviewed.

Other findings that were uncovered in this study, which were not gathered by Farber (1983) or Guy (1987) who studied the personal lives of therapists in mid-career, were that some participants stated that their clinical social work education has helped them to set more healthy boundaries with people in their personal lives, and most participants commented that they intentionally try not to take on the role of therapist when relating to others in their personal lives. These reported experiences with boundary setting and choosing not to therapize personal relationships, along with the above

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discussion of clinical social work education being both personal growth producing and stressful to personal relationships, may be reflective of many individuals newly entering the field of clinical social work.

Self-Reflection in Clinical Social Work Education

Comments that participants in this study made in regards to their experience of self-reflection in clinical social work education provide first-hand accounts to support and expand on an existing body of literature: namely, a theoretical discussion regarding the intersection of self-reflection and professional identity development in clinical social work education. These theoretical articles on self-reflection and professional identity development (Yip, 2005; Heron, 2005; Man Lam, Wong, Leung, 2006; Clare, 2007) emphasize the importance of self-reflective practice in clinical social work school, and participants in this study supported the above theoretical discussion in that they report self-reflecting more as a result of clinical social work school, and that this self-reflection has contributed to a level of awareness that has benefited them professionally and personally.

The few studies within the literature on self-reflection in clinical social work education that do gather narrative data from students (Man Lam, Wong, Leung, 2006; Clare, 2007) do not inquire about the experience or impact of this self-reflective practice on students personally. Participants in this study commented that through clinical social work education and training, they learned how to self-reflect in a smarter, healthier, and more compassionate way which has positively impacted their lives. However, a few participants in this study also shared that this self-reflection process to get to this improved level of awareness or self-reflection was frustrating, difficult, or painful.

Self-Reflection and Racial Identity in Clinical Social Work Education

Part of the theoretical discussion in the literature on self-reflection and professional identity development in clinical social work education is a collection of articles on the interface of social identity development, racial identity development, and professional identity development (Miehls, 2001; Miller & Garren, 2008). These authors discuss the importance of social and racial identity development in clinical social work education, and describe the development process that can take place through self-reflection and intergroup dialogue, but similarly to the overarching body of literature, the authors do not gather first hand accounts of this experience from clinical social work students.

5 of the 10 participants in this study commented on their self-reflection process regarding their racial identity. Four participants who commented on racial identity identified as white, one of the participants did not identify as white. One white participant stated, "I thought about race a lot before and studied about race, but I hadn't looked inside in the way that I was forced to at Smith…knowing when I have racist thoughts or unfounded fears based on race." The other white participants stated that it was difficult to feel so aware of their whiteness, and one participant commented that it was difficult but it was worth the struggle. The participant who commented on racial identity in clinical social work school who did not identify as white commented that she fluctuated between feeling frustrated that white students were making assumptions about her, and being glad to be witnessing and being a part of people being curious for the right reasons. Previous to conducting this study, I was unable to find any research that

gathered the voices of clinical social work students regarding their experiences of racial identity development.

Therapy and Clinical Social Work Education

Findings were not consistent with previous research regarding helping professionals' help seeking tendencies. Siebert and Siebert (2007) found that having a clinical license improved practitioners likelihood of seeking help, and the authors posited that seeking help could become a particular threat to new helping professionals' idealized images of themselves as professional caregivers; however, all of the participants in this study have attended psychotherapy, 6 of 10 participants were currently working with a therapist, and 3 more participants stated that they were not attending therapy due to finances and health insurance concerns but that they would like to be in therapy. So, most participants did not report any resistance to attending therapy, in fact 5 out of 10 participants cited their therapist as one of the main reasons that they chose to go to clinical social work school; however, a few participants did comment that therapy was a taboo in their family of origin.

Findings were consistent with previous literature regarding the connection between personal psychotherapy and clinical social worker professional identity development. 5 out 10 participants commented that personal psychotherapy was useful, important, or necessary for clinical social work students/ practitioners. One participant stated, "I think that in order to be really good at self-reflecting and knowing what's going on in the room, I feel like you have to get your own counseling." Two other participants commented that it is important to experience being in the position of the client in order to be an effective therapist, and other participants commented on experiencing a

development of empathy through therapy that they found to be useful for them professionally. Mackey (1994) interviewed 15 experienced clinicians to explore the connection between personal psychotherapy and clinical social work professional development. Through content analysis, he uncovered 5 themes discussed in the interviews: enhancement of empathy, understanding the therapeutic process, self-awareness, along with therapist as model, and personal and professional development. 6 out of 10 participants in this study additionally commented on their experiences of observing, learning from, and having increased transparency in their personal psychotherapy. I had not uncovered similar findings in previous research in this subject area (Mackey 1994; Siebert and Siebert, 2007). While some participants shared appreciation for this increased observation or transparency in their personal psychotherapy, a few also expressed concern that the observation or transparency may interfere with the work in their therapy.

Limitations

I had some difficulty tying all of the findings in this study to previous related research and literature because most of the related research examined the personal lives of established psychotherapists. The literature that did examine clinical social work students, focused on the professional identity development of students, rather than on the impact of clinical social work education on students' personal lives and relationships. So, I was unable to compare several of the findings in this study to pre-existing narrative data regarding individuals' personal experiences of clinical social work education.

Additional limitations of this study were its limited sample size, and the demographic composition of the sample. A total of 10 individuals participated in this

study. The generalizability of the findings was impacted by the small sample size; a larger sample may have created different results. Also, 8 out of 10 participants got their clinical social work education through Smith College, while 2 out of 10 participants got their clinical social work education through Boston College. It is possible that the findings may have been more representative of the experience of Smith students in particular and reflective of the psychodynamic orientation of the Smith program, than representative of clinical social work students overall.

Implications for Clinical Social Work

Given that clinical social workers use the self as a primary tool in professional practice, and given that students are engaging in a rigorous combination of practicing clinical work for the first time and participating in coursework that may inform their personal lives, it is reasonable to assume that narrative findings in this study of the impact of clinical social work education on students personal lives and relationships has implications for clinical social work practice.   Implications for clinical social work of this study, of the impact of clinical social work education on the personal lives and relationships of those who go through the education process, are that most participants self-reported that they experienced personal growth that they relate to their clinical social work education, some participants described a rather profound impact of their education on their personal lives, while a few participants described this impact as minimal. Some participants also shared that while they ultimately attribute personal growth to clinical social work education, the education and training process during clinical social work school was an intense experience and added significant stress to their personal self-reflection, to their relating to other people, or to their partner relationships. Most

participants also commented on personal psychotherapy being a valuable support and learning tool for them both personally and professionally. This study is an opportunity to raise awareness regarding the intense and personal nature of clinical social work education for some clinical social work students; the study also identifies potential areas of personal growth for clinical social work students, along with possible challenges and difficulties that may be encountered during the education and training process, and also identifies ways in which personal psychotherapy can be valuable to clinical social work students or ways in which clinical social work education may change personal psychotherapy for students.

Areas for Future Research

This study of the impact of clinical social work education and training on personal lives and relationships of students should be expanded upon do to the small sample size of 10 participants, the demographic composition of the sample, and the use of only one method of research in this study. Reconstructing this qualitative, inductive study with a larger sample size could provide more merit for the themes that emerge from the narrative data. In addition, given that this study relies completely on self-report from individuals who went through clinical social work school, it may add depth to the study to interview individuals who are in close relationships with students to gather their perspective on how the education process has impacted the personal lives of students, or it may also be useful to apply quantitative research to this topic of research. However, a review of previous related research and literature revealed that there has been a very limited amount of narrative data collected from clinical social work students regarding their experience of education and training, and given the importance of one's use of self

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as a clinical social worker, it is sensible that future research should be conducted

gathering the voices of clinical social work students. The findings of this study indicate

that these future studies should inquire about the potential overlap of professional and

personal development for clinical social work students.

There is a body of qualitative research gathering the first hand accounts of

psychotherapists in mid-career regarding the impact of their jobs on their personal lives

and relationships. The contrast in the findings of this study to those studies (Farber,

1983, Guy 1987) suggests the possibility that therapists at different stages of their career

may experience different affects of the profession on their personal lives. Future research

could be done interviewing therapists who are at different stages of their career regarding

the impact of the profession on their personal lives and relationships.

Conclusion

Research on the impact of clinical social work education on the personal lives and

relationships of students is potentially useful to clinical social work students and to

clinical social work educators. The findings of such studies could be helpful to students,

who are training to serve as a source of support professionally, to develop awareness of

students' common experiences of the education process, and to identify and to meet their

own needs. Educators could use this research to consider including discussion regarding

the use of self within class curriculum, or to generate supports for students such as peer

groups or personal psychotherapy.

Coming to a conclusion regarding why more research has not been carried

out addressing the impact of clinical social work education on students' personal lives,

was beyond the scope of this study. However, the rich commentary presented in the

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findings of this study gathered from first hand interviews with recent graduates from clinical social work masters' programs indicate that carrying out future research on this topic could indeed have implications for clinical social work students and educators, and for clinical social work practice.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Demographic Questions:

1. What are your age, race, ethnicity, gender, and living situation?

2. Where did you attend graduate school for social work, and when did you graduate?

Interview Questions:

1. Is social work your first career or have you experienced a career change?

2. Have you experienced any changes in yourself (way of thinking or feeling, behavior) that you attribute to the social work education process, and how have these changes affected your personal life?

3. Are there certain aspects of your identity, such as age, race, gender, sexual orientation, relationship or family situation, a particular life experience that have especially influenced your experience of the social work education process?

4. Opportunities for self-reflection are built into social work programs differently, but usually pertain to: reflecting on one's social status regarding race, gender, socioeconomic status, reflecting on oneself in relationships, etc. Has the role of self-reflection or self-examination changed for you since you began attending social work school? If so, how?

5. Do you have a partner? If so, how long have you been with your partner? And are you the primary caretaker for anyone (children, parents, or others)?

6. How has social work education and training affected your partner relationship(s), positively and negatively, if you've had partner relationships since you began graduate school? Or, if you are not in a relationship, how has social work education affected this aspect of your life.

7. Have you ever attended therapy? Why did you begin attending therapy? What function has therapy provided for you since you began social work education?

Appendix B

<u>Recruitment Letter</u>

Subject: A request from Tara Slade, For Participation In Her Research
Study Towards Her Smith College School for Social Work Thesis Project

Greetings,

My name is Tara Slade, and I am currently a graduate student at
Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a research study
exploring the personal experience of the social work education process. I
am curious to learn about how participating in social work academics and
fieldwork has affected individuals' personal development and partner
relationships. To conduct this research, I will interview social workers who
have graduated from a social work master's program recently (within the
last two years). Through these individual interviews, I hope to reveal
common themes of struggle, themes of growth, and also highlight
differences among the experiences of those interviewed. The data that I
collect in these interviews will be used for my Masters in Social Work
thesis.

In order to participate in this research, you must have completed a
social work masters program with a concentration in clinical social work
within the last two years. If you are interested in participating in this
research, please contact me via the email address or phone number
provided below. In addition, if you know of anyone who would be
interested in participating in this study, please forward this email to them. I
will distribute a consent form before each interview that will provide
additional details for each participant.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Tara Slade

slatara@gmail.com

(201) 248-9878

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant:

My name is Tara Slade, and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am undertaking a research project for my master's thesis. The focus of the project is a study of the effects of social work education and training on the personal development and partner relationships of recent graduates of MSW programs with a concentration in clinical social work. For the purpose of this study, a recent graduate is defined as someone who graduated from a Masters of social work program less than two years ago.

I will conduct all interviews individually and confidentially. I ask for your consent to be interviewed because you graduated with a Masters degree in Social Work with a concentration in clinical social work less than two years ago. In addition, you are English speaking and you may be of any ethnic/racial group, and of any gender identity or sexual orientation. During the interview, I will ask you demographic questions. Following these questions I will ask you to share your perceptions of the positive and negative affects of your social work education and training on your personal life and on your partner relationships. The interview will be approximately one hour in length and will be recorded by audio tape recorder. I will transcribe all of the audio tape recordings.

There are potential risks associated with participation in this study. The possibility exists that in a discussion that focuses on thought and feelings related to your graduate education and to your relationships, you may experience uncomfortable feelings.

There will be no financial benefit to you for your participation in this study. However, the benefits of participation may include a sense of relief for you due to the interview providing an opportunity to verbalize in a confidential and safe space, thoughts and feelings about yourself, or about your partner relationships. You may also benefit by knowing that your participation in this study will contribute to field and practice of professional social work.

You will be interviewed in strict confidentiality and strict confidentiality will be maintained regarding all information gathered. The final data will be discussed in such a manner that it cannot be associated with you or your family. The data will be presented as a whole, and when brief illustrative quotes or vignettes are used, they will be carefully disguised. However, the possibility exists, in the completed study, that your partner may recognize information from your interview. In addition, my research advisor will have access to the data after identifying information has been removed, and she will be the only person other than myself who may see the data. The recordings will be stored in a

locked drawer for three years, consistent with Federal regulations. The recordings will remain secured after this time until they are no longer needed and will then be destroyed.

During the interview, you may pause, stop, withdraw, or choose not to answer any question. Also, any question that is uncomfortable for you or any question you choose not to answer for any reason may be omitted. Also, you may withdraw from the study until May 1, 2009. If you withdraw from the study, all materials related to you will be immediately destroyed. Participation in this study is voluntary. If you consent to participate and to be interviewed, indicated by your signature on this form, you remain free to end the interview at your discretion or to abstain from answering any question at any time. You may reach the chair of the Human Subjects Review Board at (413) 585-7974.

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS, AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature of Participant:_____ Date:_____

Signature of Researcher:_____ Date:_____

If you have questions, my contact information is as follows:
Tara Slade
10 Bromfield Rd.
Somerville, MA 02144
(201) 248-9878
Slatara@gmail.com

Please keep a copy of this consent for your records.

Appendix D

Human Subjects Review Letter of Approval

January 10, 2009

Tara Slade
10 Bromfield Rd.
Somerville, MA 02144

Dear Tara,

The Human Subjects Review Committee has reviewed your materials. You have done an excellent job in pulling them together and there are just a few additions, corrections, or clarifications we would like you to make before we give final approval to your study. They are as follows:

<u>Regarding the</u> <u>Application</u>
In the last paragraph under **Project Purpose and Design**, please add that the findings may also be used for other presentation and publication.

Under **Characteristics**, it is clear that you are planning to recruit your sample in the Boston area. Perhaps it would be a good idea to add your geographical limits, since you are planning in-person interviews. We also wondered if under **Characteristics,** you would want to specify that your participants should have had a concentration in clinical social work. It seems to be the assumption that it is clinical social workers you are thinking about. You also seem to assume you won't be able to get a diverse sample. There are some things you could do. You could contact the former Chairs of the Council for Students of Color to ask them to identify potential colleagues. You can also see if there is a Boston Chapter of the National Association of Black Social Workers and or the National Association of Puerto Rican and Hispanic Social Workers.

In **Nature of Participation** you said that you would interview your participants at the clinic where you are an intern. We also wonder how realistic it is to expect your participants to come to your work place, especially since your interviews will probably be during work hours. Perhaps you should offer that, or their work place, or another public site that would be convenient. You may want to include the option of hiring a transcriber and attach a Confidentiality Pledge so that that might be available to you.

Under **Risks**, it isn't necessary to describe in detail what feelings they may have. Discomfort is enough. Also, since you plan to interview clinicians, you do not need to provide a referral resource list. Please delete mention of it.

Also under **Risks**, just say they can stop, withdraw, or choose not to answer a question. It isn't limited to them being upset

Under **Informed Consent**, you should give a date for participants to withdraw from the study, explain how they can withdraw, and what you will do with any data collected from them.

Regarding the Informed Consent
In paragraph one, please say that you are a grad student at Smith College *School for Social Work*. Also in paragraph one, we think you meant *effects* instead of *affects*.

In paragraph two, what do you mean by "All consents will be requested individually …"? Remember, you are writing this letter to the participant. Please use active voice, such as "I will ask you to…," instead of "you are being asked…." It's important for the participant to understand that you are the person who will be conducting the interviews.

In paragraph three, shorten the discussion of risks as described above and leave out the statement about referral resources.

In the last paragraph, revise as discussed above but add that they may withdraw up until a particular date and that should they withdraw, all materials related to them will be immediately destroyed.

Please include information at the end about how participants can contact the Smith SSW HSR Committee chair.

Regarding the Interview Guide
In the demographic questions, we have some concern about the question about sexual orientation. Some may find that intrusive. You ask about their partner and their relationship with their partner and there is lots of room for the participant to share their orientation should they wish to.

Also, question # 3, "How did you pay for the social work graduate program?" is not a demographic question. In fact, we're not clear how it fits with your purpose. You could later in the interview inquire about the financial burden of graduate training and its impact.

Question # 4 also is not a demographic question and should be moved to the body of the questionnaire.

Regarding the Recruitment Materials
Only Smith people will know what you mean by A09. It would be confusing to others.

<u>Regarding the Referral Resources</u>
Please omit.

I hope these suggestions will be useful to you in your revision of the materials. We look forward to their return and to giving final approval to this very interesting study. People are, as you say, always talking about the impact of MSW education. It will be interesting to see the results of a planful study of the topic. Please indicate any changes you make by typing in color or in bold or by <u>underlining</u>. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Beth Prullage, Research Advisor

January 24, 2009

Tara Slade

Dear Tara,

Your revised materials have been reviewed and all is now in order. We are glad to give final approval to your study. We did note that there was a missing "t" in the "not" in the first line of the last paragraph of your Consent. Also, please delete my name and email address and say they can reach the chair of HSR at (413) 585-7974. Please send Laurie Wyman a copy of the amended last page on the Consent for your permanent file.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project. One hears that the experience can be tough on relationships. It is a good idea to really try to find out if this is so and in what way.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Beth Prullage, Research Advisor