Godspeed: Counselor Education Doctoral Student Experiences from Diverse Religious and Spiritual Backgrounds

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Abstract

Amidst growing literature regarding the importance of spirituality within counseling and counselor education, little is known of the experiences of doctoral students regarding their religious and spiritual backgrounds while matriculating through their doctoral program. This research explored the experiences of four researcher-participant counselor education doctoral students from diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds. This exploration deepened their understanding of the role their religious and spiritual identities played in their thoughts, emotions, challenges, and strengths of their experiences. A phenomenological autoethnography method was used for this study. A unique data analysis procedure was developed called Integrative Group Process Phenomenology (IGPP), which was used to analyze journal and music data. The overarching experience was described as a journey with four primary categories of themes identified: painful experiences, learning and awareness, velocity (i.e., themes descriptive of movement and action), and connect versus disconnect. This research brought to light the challenges that counselor education doctoral students may encounter in their training, while highlighting the strength and resilience that religion and spirituality may offer. Recommendations, limitations, and implications for the counseling profession are offered to further the development of research regarding religious and spiritual experiences.

Keywords

Counseling Students, Religion, Spirituality, Autoethnography, Phenomenology, Doctoral Training

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Amidst growing literature regarding the importance of spirituality within counseling and counselor education, little is known of the experiences of doctoral students regarding their religious and spiritual backgrounds while matriculating through their doctoral program. This research explored the experiences of four researcher-participant counselor education doctoral students from diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds. This exploration deepened their understanding of the role their religious and spiritual identities played in their thoughts, emotions, challenges, and strengths of their experiences. A phenomenological autoethnography method was used for this study. A unique data analysis procedure was developed called Integrative Group Process Phenomenology (IGPP), which was used to analyze journal and music data. The overarching experience was described as a journey with four primary categories of themes identified: painful experiences, learning and awareness, velocity (i.e., themes descriptive of movement and action), and connect versus disconnect. This research brought to light the challenges that counselor education doctoral students may encounter in their training, while highlighting the strength and resilience that religion and spirituality may offer. Recommendations, limitations, and implications for the counseling profession are offered to further the development of research regarding religious and spiritual experiences. Keywords: Counseling Students, Religion, Spirituality, Autoethnography, Phenomenology, Doctoral Training

Across professional disciplines, spirituality has been shown to be an important factor in physical health and mental wellness (Anandarajah & Hight, 2001; Dixon & Wilcox, 2016; Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014; Koenig, 2015; Koenig, Larson, & McCullough, 2000; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Morrison, Clutter, Pritchett, & Demmitt, 2009; Richards & Bergin, 2005; Stanard, Sandhu, & Painter, 2000; Tabei, Zarei, & Joulaei, 2016; van Asselt & Senstock, 2009). Similarly, a noticed increase in the use of spirituality into clinical practice has emerged (Anandarajah & Hight, 2001; Morrison et al., 2009) as clients prefer to be counseled based on their past religious and spiritual experiences and backgrounds (Rose, Westefeld, & Ansley, 2001). The profession of counseling is often differentiated from other mental health professions by a focus on healthy functioning and holistic wellness:

prevention instead of remediation (Bohecker, Schellenberg, & Silvey, 2017; Myers & Sweeney, 2008). Wellness is considered a state of well-being in which the "body, mind, and spirit are integrated" (Myers, 2009, p. 563). The idea that spirituality and religion are important characteristics of an individual's health and wellness is supported by the World Health Organization (WHO, 1983) and is uncontested in the counseling literature (Bohecker, Schellenberg, & Silvey, 2017).

The counseling profession seems to value client spiritual support networks, encourage counselors to engage in self-care activities to promote their own spiritual well-being, and recognize the impact of religion and spirituality on both client and counselor (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016). Additionally, the literature in counseling continues to echo previous findings highlighting the importance of planned, consistent, and effective training of counseling students on issues of spirituality (Bohecker, Schellenberg, & Silvey, 2017; Cashwell & Young, 2004; Hall, Burkholder, & Sterner, 2014; Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2014; Myers & Willard, 2003; Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014; Young, Wiggins-Frame, & Cashwell, 2007). Furthermore, there is a meaningful and corresponding link between spirituality and counseling as a profession (Hall, Burkholder, & Sterner, 2014). Some have found a sense of calling into counseling "as a function of [their] spiritual path" (Hall, Burkholder, & Sterner, 2014, p. 13), supporting previous mental health literature (Duffy, Bott, Allan, Torrey, & Dik, 2012; Freeman, 2007; Graff, 2007; Hirsbrunner, Loeffler, & Rompf, 2012; Prest, Russel, & D'Souza, 1999).

For more than two decades, the literature of the counseling profession has recognized the need to include spirituality in counselor training (Curtis & Glass, 2002; Dobmeier & Reiner, 2012; Pate & High, 1995). At present, research reveals an increase in this call into counseling, as counselor education programs play an important role and are vital to the training of competent professional counselors (Bishop, Avila-Juarbe, & Thumme, 2003; Bohecker, Schellenberg, & Silvey, 2017; Briggs & Rayle, 2005; CACREP, 2014; Cashwell & Young, 2004; Curtis & Glass, 2002; Dobmeier & Reiner, 2012; Hagedorn & Gutierrez, 2009; Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2014; Pate & Hall, 2005; Polanski, 2003; Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014; Young, Cashwell, Wiggins-Frame, & Belaire, 2002). Researchers found that students may understand the importance of spirituality and religion in counseling (Yocum, Silvey, Milacci, & Garzon, 2015) and at the same time are not comfortable discussing topics relating to spirituality and religion or the importance of their own spirituality (Henriksen et al., 2015; Prest et al., 1999; Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014; Souza, 2002). As a result of not including discussions of spirituality and religion in counselor training programs, counselors do not feel prepared to address spiritual or religious issues in counseling sessions (Adams, 2012; Henriksen et al., 2015), which has the capacity to result in cultural insensitivity or even harm when working with clients (ACA, 2014; Bohecker, Schellenberg, & Silvey, 2017; Helminiak, 2001; Henriksen et al., 2015).

The reason training programs are not addressing spiritual and religious issues in counseling does not appear to be due to a lack of a training standard (CACREP, 2016, II.2.g) or examples as to how educators or counselor education programs can integrate spiritual and religious dimensions into coursework, curriculum, and programs. In fact, ACA has endorsed competencies for counselors to ethically integrate spirituality and religion into their counseling practice, recognize diversity and embrace a cross-cultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts (ASERVIC, 2009). These competencies (ASERVIC, 2009) include a section on counselor self-awareness, specifically emphasizing the importance of a professional counselor actively exploring his or her own attitudes, beliefs, and values about spirituality and/or religion (ASERVIC, 2009, No. 3).

A review of research identified barriers to the incorporation of spirituality and religion into counselor education, such as a concern regarding the taboo nature of spiritual and religious beliefs (Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2014). Another barrier found is a lack of understanding of the importance of spirituality and religion in the therapeutic process (Adams et al., 2015; Hage, Hopson, Siegel, Payton, & DeFanti, 2006). In addition, another barrier is a reluctance on the part of counselor training programs to include spiritual and religious diversity into the curriculum (Briggs & Rayle, 2005; Souza, 2002; Young, Cashwell, Wiggins-Frame, & Belaire, 2002). Therefore, a perceived lack of competency (Hage, et al., 2006), a separation of church and state (Kelly, 1994; Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2014), and a lack of guidance (Hagedorn & Gutierrez, 2009; Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2014) could all be attributing factors to the disconnect between training recommendations and application.

We wanted to understand our own lived experiences of inconsistency between the counseling competencies on spirituality and religion and programs and counselor education training. We were all at differing developmental levels across several campuses with very different religious and spiritual values and beliefs. Yet we discovered similar experiences of marginalization within our counselor education doctoral program as we perceived they related to our religious and spiritual beliefs. We were curious to understand if our doctoral level counselor educator program would recognize our diversity, embrace and support our cultural contexts of spiritual and religious beliefs, and if these experiences would continue as we navigated our respective programs of study. We grew in our knowledge of counselor education training literature that provided insight and understanding of the reluctance of counselor educators to include discussions or activities of spiritualty and religion into the counselor training curriculum (Bohecker, Schellenberg, & Silvey, 2017; Briggs & Rayle, 2005; Hagedorn & Gutierrez, 2009; Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2014; Souza, 2002; Young, Cashwell, Wiggins-Frame, & Belaire, 2002). As a result, we decided to explore our own experiences as doctoral students from diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds training to become counselor educators through the overarching research question of: "How do doctoral students with differing religious/spiritual values and beliefs experience their counselor education program?"

Method

Qualitative research methods are recommended for studies that are exploratory (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Hermeneutic phenomenology has become a widely accepted method for describing lived experiences of a particular phenomenon and ethnography is a study of customs and cultures (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; van Manen, 1988, 1997). A combination of ethnography and autobiography, autoethnography involves the researcher to also be a participant and provides a method of critique of a self-narrative phenomenon with others within a social context (Spry, 2001). Autoethnography originates as a discourse from the margins of dominant culture; a position in which we found ourselves, as authors, with which we strongly identified (Pratt, 1986). We wanted to explore our lived experiences as religious and spiritual beings experiencing a phenomenon of matriculating through a doctoral program in counselor education. Therefore, a phenomenological autoethnography approach was selected for this study, which provided us with an opportunity for an enriched understanding of our lived experiences of a cultural phenomenon (Muncey, 2010; van Manen, 1988, 1997). The researcher-participant roles provided personalized narrative accounts where we could draw from our own experiences to expand our individual and collective understandings of the particular phenomenon and provide space for our experiences to be heard (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

This methodology allowed us to bring together our lived experiences to form the basis for allowing us to share and create meaning of our experiences. Our intention was to collaborate

with one another to gain understanding of self, of the phenomenon, and to create meaning from our experiences (Muncey, 2010; van Manen 1988, 1997). We sought a depth of understanding and insight into our specific experiences, aimed at providing counselor educators and doctoral students with insight into the experiences of doctoral students in counselor education program as they relate to their religious/spiritual values and beliefs. The following provides a foundational context for who we are as researchers and participants.

Conceptual Framework

This inquiry was grounded in the Heidegger hermeneutic process and the Hermeneutic Circle, which describes a way of understanding (Spanos, 1976). The ontological premise is that the whole cannot be understood without an understanding of each part, and likewise each part cannot be understood without an understanding of the whole (Spanos, 1976). This circularity supported our researcher-participant stance whereby we sought to understand a lived experience of a cultural phenomenon, which required an understanding of the experience (Spanos, 1976).

As both researchers and participants in a phenomenological autoethnography, we were able to provide richness and thickness to the data collected and engage in the development of themes from a place of deep understanding of the cultural phenomena under study (Geertz, 1973). When we were participants, we experienced "Being There," engaging fully in the lived cultural experiences (Geertz, 1988, p. 130; Watson, 1999). We would schedule specific times to meet as participants, with the intention of "Being There" in a different way, bearing witness to one another's experiences and engaging in additional data collection (Geertz, 1988, p. 130). Alternatively, we also were researchers who engaged in "Being Here" bringing our lived experiences into the "work of ethnography," analyzing data and developing our collective story (Geertz, 1988, p. 130; Spry, 2001, p. 709).

Participants

An academic institutional review board (IRB) application was submitted at a Northwestern institution in the United States and approval was granted for this research. We are four (4) women from diverse spiritual and religious backgrounds who met in a doctoral program training to become counselor educators. We are also each licensed mental health professionals. Our ages were in the twenties, thirties, and fifties. Our spiritual and religious beliefs are grounded in Judaism, Nazarene, the Church of Latter-Day Saints, and Buddhist/Native American traditions. Each of us value deeply our religious and spiritual beliefs and also identify as professional counselor educators. At the time of the study, we were enrolled in a doctoral program in the Northwestern United States.

Data Collection

Van Manen (1997) states, "Hermeneutic phenomenological research is a search for fullness" (p. 12). To obtain fullness and depth, we explored our lived experiences of the cultural phenomenon through four different data collection methods. We used reflective journaling, photo-voice, music, and group process (de Bruin, 2016; Johnson & Eveas, 2013; van Manen, 1997; Wang, 2005). We chose these varied forms of qualitative methods of data collection to provide a range of opportunities in which to engage in self-reflection with the experiences (Geertz, 1988; Muncey, 2010; Spry, 2001; van Manen, 1997; Wang, 2005). Utilizing a variety of data collection methods provided a foundation that allowed us as researcher-participants to

bring in our personal meanings and shared meanings of our lived experiences of the cultural phenomenon under study.

We wrote reflective journals, took or found photographs, and found music and song lyrics that represented our experiences in our counselor education doctoral program as they related to our religious and spiritual values and beliefs. Over the course of a year, we collected data asking ourselves the following questions:

1. What have been your thoughts and feelings as you have engaged in this doctoral program as it related to your religious/spiritual values and beliefs?
2. What has been the most challenging or the most encouraging and supportive experience for you in the doctoral program related to your religious/spiritual values and beliefs?
3. What was the most significant experience for you in the doctoral program related to your religious/spiritual values and beliefs and what meaning can you make of this?
4. What factors within the doctoral program affected your religious/spiritual values and beliefs?

As participants, we were intentional about wearing our emotional and experiential red hat (de Bono, 1985, 1999). As mental health professionals, we are well versed on identifying and labeling feelings. We leaned into our experiences and reflected on our thoughts, emotions, intuitions, and impressions. We collected data individually through reflective journaling, photo-voice, and music on a weekly basis for two months during a spring semester and two months during the following fall semester (de Bruin, 2016; Geertz, 1988; Johnson & Eveas, 2013; Spry, 2001; van Manen, 1997; Wang, 2005). The individually collected data were kept private until the group process. Keeping on our participant red emotional hat, we met as a focus group at the end of each semester to share our collected data (Palmer, 2010). Through this focus group process new data emerged, which was collected and included for data analysis. For example, the song lyrics in Figure 1 were shared as a way to describe an experience and the photo in Figure 2 was included in the data collection from our focus group.

Figure 1. Song Lyrics

Nothing's gonna hurt you the way that words do
When they settle 'neath your skin
Kept on the inside and no sunlight
Sometimes a shadow wins
But I wonder what would happen if you

Say what you wanna say
And let the words fall out
Honestly I wanna see you be brave
With what you want to say
And let the words fall out
Honestly I wanna see you be brave

Figure 2. Photo from Data Collection in Focus Group
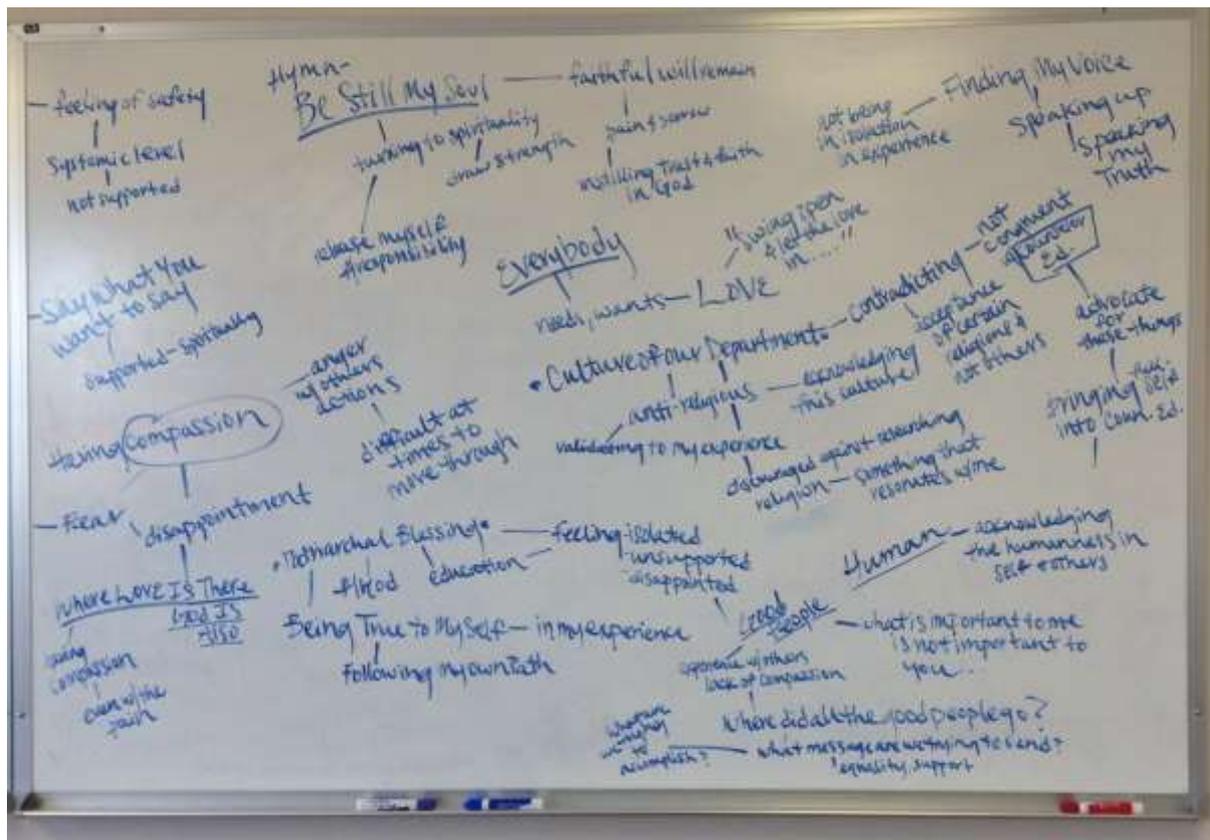
Data Analysis

After all the data was collected, we were intentional about taking off our participant red hat to don our researcher blue hat (de Bono, 1985, 1999). As mental health professionals we are trained in meta-thinking and holding the role of process observer. We did not attempt to compartmentalize or bracket our experiences during the data analysis phase, but rather engaged in the hermeneutic process of bringing in our experiences to understand the data (Spanos, 1976). Thus far, we had engaged in this study all together, engaging in collaborative and collective discussions and making decisions through consensus. When we participated in the data collection focus group together, we discovered the richness and thickness of the data through hearing and responding to each other's viewpoints, which then deepened the meanings and richness of information. Through the process of attempting to make a decision as to which one(s) of us would engage in coding the data, we realized that all of us had received formal training in qualitative research with an emphasis in hermeneutic phenomenology and all of us wanted to participate in the coding and analysis process. Therefore, we developed the Integrative Group Process Phenomenology (IGPP) method of analysis so we could collectively participate, contribute, and integrate the coding and thematic analysis procedures of van Manen's (1997) hermeneutic phenomenology with the collected data.

Integrative Group Process Phenomenology

We wanted to maintain our group research team and called the method for analysis Integrative Group Process Phenomenology (IGPP). We met as a group and utilized van Manen's (1997) phenomenological approach of open coding the data to draw out significant

and less significant themes. We reviewed every journal sentence, picture, song lyric, and listened to every song in the collected data together. During this process if one of us would see a theme, she would propose the theme, and the rest of us would engage in dialogue and evaluate if the theme resonated with the others. We would not necessarily decide at that meeting but would take time, days and weeks, for each person to engage in self-reflection to determine if the theme resonated fully. If a theme was experienced by everyone, then it would be categorized as a significant theme. The themes were documented and each of us found her own data to support the theme. Themes not experienced by everyone were considered a less significant theme. Less significant themes continued to be evaluated until it was a consensus that it would not be included as a theme or incorporated into one of the significant themes. Engaging in IGPP was a very intentional and time-consuming process of prolonged engagement with the data that was conducted slowly. We engaged in this process during the year following data collection. We believe it is only through the IGPP that we were able to support each other with navigating both the researcher role and the participant role throughout the coding and analysis processes.

Due to the nature of participating in this study as a researcher and a participant, there were times during coding and analysis that we would have difficulties with the duality of both of the roles. We acknowledged the presence of this occurrence throughout the group process experience and made attempts to stay within a particular role. For example, if one of us was sharing their reflective journal as a participant, another person in the research team would engage in the researcher role while the person sharing would be free to stay in the participant role (Muncey, 2010).

Triangulation and Transferability

Patton (2014) advocated the use of triangulation to strengthen a study and increase the trustworthiness of the data. The use of four different collection methods provided data triangulation (Patton, 2014). Data was also triangulated among us through the incorporation of each of our perspectives. Investigator triangulation was addressed through having four of us as researcher-participants, and the use of collective analysis within the design of this study provided methodological triangulation. Due to the autoethnographic nature of this study and how we worked as a research team, all aspects of this study were conducted using consensus for decision making including reviewing transcripts, coding data, and engaging in thematic analysis. Passing the data back through us as participants in this study was inherent in the design, therefore increasing trustworthiness of data collection and analysis. Furthermore, our goal related to trustworthiness was to provide readers with a narrative of our authentic experiences, which according to Ellis (1995) would be enough to establish validity.

Our lived experiences may not be limited to us and may be transferable to other doctoral students in other counselor education programs. The idea that we would have had isolated experiences was challenged by Stanley (1993), who suggested transferability in qualitative research. Transferability is possible because of the belief that people do not accumulate their experiences in a social vacuum, which would be a particularly valid position in ethnography studies because of the social and cultural nature of the method (Stanley, 1993). The distinctions of self and other in autoethnography was also challenged by Mykhalovskiy (1996) who suggested that to write individual experience is to write social experience.

Collective Findings of our Lived Social Experience

The thematic analysis was descriptive of our lived experiences. While we each came from unique religious and spiritual backgrounds, we found collective similarities and harmony

within our experiences. During the two-year process of data collection and data analysis, we came to a consensus of the themes that emerged from the data. Due to the amount to time spent immersed in the experiences, data, and themes, the overarching metaphor of a process or journey resonated with each of us. It took time, prolonged engagement with the data, and the group consensus process of IGPP for us to all see a larger pattern, and then how our individual experiences fit into that pattern. The following presentation of the collective findings begins at our end by presenting the larger pattern and then moving into the details of experiences within.

Figure 3. Godspeed
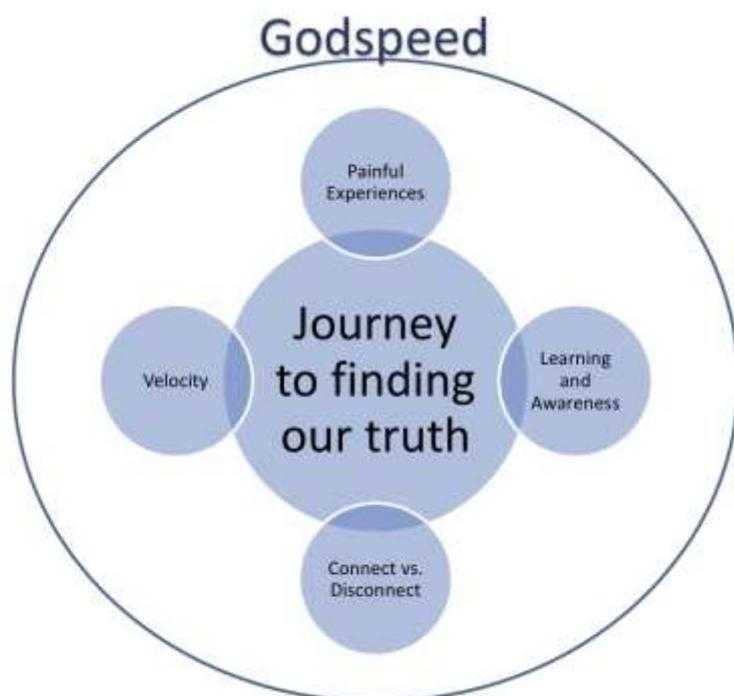
Godspeed

The image in Figure 3 represents our overall experience. As we came to understand our experiences, the aspect of us being on journey was clear; that our individual experiences were a form of expedition that we each took through our doctoral training. To capture the overall essence of the journey not only for ourselves but also for fellow and future doctoral students, we connected with the term Godspeed. Godspeed is a salutation given to encourage prosperity and well wishes as one embarks on a journey (Godspeed, n.d.). While not a dimension or theme itself, it captures the hope and strength of a journey grounded in one's beliefs that framed our entire experience. When infusing this journey to our respective religious and spiritual identities there were various experiences that we encountered along the way. The individual experiences fit within four main dimensional categories, namely, **painful experiences**, **learning and awareness**, **connect vs. disconnect**, and **velocity.** All of the themes that emerged from analysis fit into one of the four dimensions. The journey was cyclical in nature, beginning with isolation, ending with connection, and repeating as we grew and developed into counselor educators. There was a keen awareness that each dimension of this journey was forward movement in a way that was congruent with our respective spiritual beliefs. Through this experience we gained a sense of finding our own truth in the process, with continual learning and growth in the repetitive nature of our journey. The themes and dimensions encompassed our diverse spiritual

identities and were central for each participant. Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the individual themes and how the themes fit into the four dimensions.

Figure 4. Themes and Dimensions
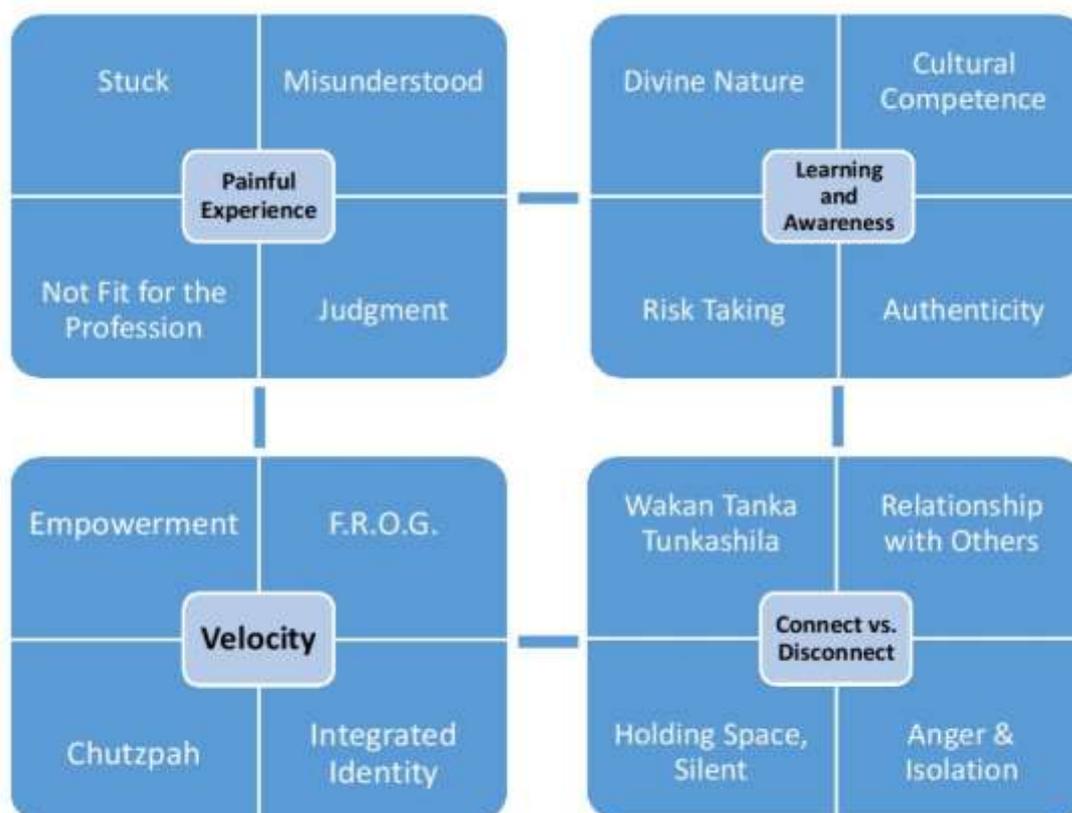
Painful Experiences

This was where we began. Painful experiences were at the forefront of our initial sharing and data collection. There was a depth of pain, hurt, and sorrow in this dimension that emerged from the four themes within this dimension of *misunderstood, judgment*, *stuck*, and *not fit for the profession*. The theme of feeling *misunderstood* was related to the impact of the assumptions of others, feeling misread, or feeling invisible and unseen. This theme was about the assumptions made about us because of our spiritual or religious beliefs and feeling as though others were not seeing past the label of our respective spiritual and religious identity. This theme was captured through the song lyrics, "have you no shame, don't you see me?" (Lee & Moody, 2007). One participant described this as the "perception of my intentions and me still seemingly misunderstood, and this lack of a desire to get to know me. I felt very lonely."

In contrast to feeling misunderstood, which contained an element of not being seen, *judgment* was about being seen only for our spiritual or religious beliefs, then questioned, not accepted, devalued, or rejected. There were feelings of a lack of support and an overall judgment towards spirituality and religiosity in general. One participant stated, "I wanted to shout, 'how could you not practice what you preach? How could you not accept me…and think it's okay?'" In this quote, we can hear her anger at not being accepted, to experience firsthand the rejection of her spiritual identity. For another participant, the pain of being judged was described as "so hurtful…I close myself off and disconnect." This closing off is similarly

described by another participants choice of the song "Because of you" (Clarkson, Hodges, & Moody, 2005). The lyrics of this song describe the pain of opening up, getting close to others, sharing our spiritual selves and the fear and shame that comes from judgment and rejection. This song expressed the hurt, distrust, and distance that were experienced by each of us as part of being judged.

The *stuck* theme was descriptive of being stagnant, tired, and disheartened, stunted, and repetition. It was described by one participant as follows:

> I allowed the judgment…to consume my awareness and place [me] in a position of stagnancy; of freezing in place and not being able to produce and move forward in the passions that motivated and brought me to where I am in this moment.

We can hear how consuming this pain was for her, and how it seemed to cloud the path forward, halting any movement. At times the experience of being *stuck* was internal, a general discouragement and inability to make movement. Feeling *stuck* was also experienced externally as described metaphorically in lyric as living in a music box, in which "the mallets and the gears are always turning and everyone inside the mechanism is yearning to get out" (Spektor, 2006). This represents how the environment around us was stuck; hearing the same reactions repeatedly, not seeing movement in our profession, and the tiredness that comes from realizing all of the energy to move forward has only led us in circles. The experience of doing the same thing repeatedly, not being able to move forward, or wanting "get out" typify what it felt like for us to be *stuck*.

The painful message that we were *not fit for the profession* of counseling because of our spiritual and religious values and beliefs is the fourth theme in this dimension. This was described in both covert and overt examples and was associated with the action of withdrawing and hiding. One participant stated, "This situation is a reminder, during the first week back to school, that my personal beliefs…are viewed as not compatible with the counseling profession." Another participant used song lyrics to describe this pain:

> My religious and spiritual views are based on "who has to know" and it's a consistent choice and evaluation of consequences to consider every time I want to reveal or decide not to. My faith has become my "dirty little secret" that I can't share. (Wheeler & Ritter, 2005)

The pain of hiding or being "viewed as not compatible" for a profession that we were a part of hurt personally and professionally. The struggle of continuing to dedicate one's professional life to a career that does not want you, or only accepts parts of you was a grueling experience as a doctoral student and professional. While it was affirming to know, through this research, that we were not alone in experiencing this rejection, that each of us had this experience of *not being fit for the profession*; it was also disappointing and discouraging to become aware of how pervasive this issue may be within the profession counseling and counselor education. To have four women of diverse spiritual and religious practices be rejected by a profession that claims openness and inclusion was part of the pain of not being fit.

Overall, the dimension that incorporates our painful experiences highlight the depth of the struggle and challenge that we experienced on the journey. The four themes of *misunderstood, judgment, stuck,* and *not fit for the profession* capture different aspects of this pain. As stated before, part of our journey was also cyclical, so this pain was repeated overtime at multiple points throughout our doctoral experiences as it related to our spiritual and religious beliefs.

Learning and Awareness

The central themes within this dimension were *divine nature*, *cultural competence*, *risk taking*, and *authenticity* and described themes that promoted personal and professional growth. The theme of *divine nature* was recognition of the divine within us; the goodness that God created within each of us. It encompassed the awareness that we have a purpose, calling, or destiny. This included unique or spiritual gifts that propelled us to integrate our respective spiritual identity with our doctoral student identity and was exemplified as follows:

> I move through my life as a spiritual being. I feel that I often leave this instrumental piece of my SELF out of relationships with others. I remember that I am not alone and that Creator/God resides within my heart and that I must have the strength and the courage to move forward and know that I am not alone.

This was also described as a symphony in which "each one of us is glorious" (Mabey, 2014).

The *cultural competence* theme was defined as an awareness of one's own culture, compassion towards others, acceptance, and openness. This was described as a knowledge that "we are all related, all connected….the Creator is within all living being's hearts" and, "My religious and spiritual identity ultimately stems from acceptance and love of others and myself." These quotes articulate how our beliefs influenced our view of ourselves and others in a way that brought closeness to our higher power, ourselves, and others. Our spiritual and religious beliefs were the seeds for our *cultural competence* because they encouraged us to stay grounded in compassion and acceptance of others.

Risk taking was the courage to push through opposition or challenge. One participant described this when opening up to other students:

> I shared my hurt, knowing by some it would be rejected…Yet as I have opened up to those I can trust throughout this semester, regarding my spirituality and religion, I have found so many who support me and care about me...And so I went forth with courage.

We can hear her acknowledgement of the rejection, and yet took the action to push forward amidst the pain. A number of song lyrics articulated *risk taking* such as, "You gotta be bold [wiser] [hard] [tough] [stronger] [cool] [calm] [stay together]. All I know…love will save the day" (Des'ree & Ingram, 1994). Another was, "This is what it is, this is who I am. This is where I finally take my stand" (Tait, Campbell, Mosley, & Otero, 2010) and another from Wicked (Schwartz, 2003), in which *risk taking* is described as "tak[ing] a leap" to "defy gravity." Each of these songs articulate the strength, power, and bravery we experienced to not give up and to let our voices be heard. While at times it may have been a sense of fearlessness, it was also the movement forward amidst any fear or resistance we encountered.

The final theme in this dimension was *authenticity*, defined as bringing the entirety of one's true self to the moment and being whole in our interactions. As one participant wrote,

> It is important for me to be congruent and authentic and at the same time I want to say things in a way that is not simply an expression of my feelings and emotions but to do it in a way that people can hear them.

This desire to be heard and seen was a unique component of experiencing authenticity. Song lyrics further describe the meaning of *authenticity*:

> I decided long ago, never to walk in anyone's shadows. If I fail, if I succeed, at least I'll live as I believe. No matter what they take from me, they can't take away my dignity, because the greatest love of all, is happening to me; I found the greatest love of all, inside of me. The greatest love of all, is easy to achieve, learning to love yourself, it is the greatest love of all. (Masser & Creed, 1985)

We can hear in these lyrics the importance of living true to oneself, living in an honest and genuine manner with no more hiding in the "shadows." There was a freedom and completeness that were part of experiencing the authenticity, no longer allowing others to define or guide our actions, but rather being guided by our personal beliefs.

Overall, we can clearly see the growth that was central to the dimension of learning and awareness. Looking at the depth and meaning of each of the four themes, *divine nature*, *cultural competence*, *risk taking*, and *authenticity* provides a picture into this growth both personally, spiritually, and professionally.

Connect vs. Disconnect

This third dimension contained the themes of *wakan tanka tunkashila*, *relationship with others*, *holding space, silent*, and *anger and isolation* and contextualized movement towards and away, or in and out of connection with others, the profession, and our spiritual and religious beliefs. *Wakan Tanka Tunkashila* described the vastness of our relationship with our higher power. This Lakota phrase is a rich textual description of that which is sacred. While difficult to fully describe the deep meaning, it incorporates the Great Mystery, Great Spirit, and a limitless and constant interconnectedness. It weaves in a connection with the earth, our ancestors, and those around us. As one participant stated, "I am reminded of the great interconnectedness of the weaving of energy and meaning that is created through the movement of each breath in life's steps." This described the power and energy of interconnection related to our individual spiritual and religious beliefs. Another participant wrote, "It is important for me to continue to honor my faith beliefs, one of which is my belief that God is greater and bigger than any problem." In contrast, the disconnect from a higher power was articulated as feeling incomplete and a yearning and pleading for help as illustrated by the lyrics of Lee, Sheets, & Wells (2012), "How many times have you heard me cry out, 'God please take this'…Oh I need you, God, I need you now."

The theme, *relationship with others*, provided a strong sense of support, validation, and safety when reaching out to connect and be in relationship as one participant wrote, "I find strength and meaning through being in relationship with others." Another described the connection as a participant of the research:

> I love this research. I find it so meaningful to connect with the women on this research project. It is so safe and welcoming. We have different walks of life and beliefs and cultural backgrounds. Yet I feel so connected to them. We value spirituality and religion. And I feel like I am valued.

Love was an aspect of this theme described as practicing love and acceptance of self and others. The practice of our respective faith beliefs is the action of love as one participant stated, "Ultimately, I want to put aside my own self and be a conduit for God's love and compassion."

Energetically being present without judgment, while continuing to practice love and gratitude for self and others described the theme of *holding space, silent*. A participant wrote, "Sometimes it helps in the difficult moments to be silent …I am reminded of 'Be still and know that I am God'" (Psalms 46:10). This illustrated the active practice, within our respective

religious and spiritual beliefs, of being neutrally present in the moment and remaining open and aware of the unfolding process for one's self and for others. The theme of *anger and isolation* expand disconnection in this dimension and included fear and not feeling safe to be authentically represented as one's true self. One participant stated, "I cannot believe how scary it is for us to share with each other our values and beliefs in relationship. Religion and spirituality are kept silenced in a profession that is all about being relational." Another aspect was the idea of not fitting in as one participant stated, "Maybe I do not belong in counselor education." Another participant wrote, "I WAS FURIOUS! Not only is this not true, but I can't believe that people actually believe this." Feeling different from others and loneliness were also a part of this theme.

The themes in this dimension give further detail to the connection and disconnection we felt with our higher power and general belief systems, others, and ourselves. The connection that we experienced provided strength and support. This connection was something we felt together as co-researchers and cannot be understated as a unique benefit of engaging in IGPP and conducting this research together.

Velocity

The action and movement themes of *empowerment, FROG, Chutzpah,* and *integrated identity* are included in this dimension. The first theme, *empowerment*, was defined as a spunky, plucky, resistance of the expectations of others to stand up for personal values such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness. The actions evident in *empowerment* were standing firm in one's faith beliefs and advocacy. As one participant wrote, "What am I called to do when my beliefs, or the spiritual and religious beliefs of others are being shamed or not being respected? I now ask myself, what can I do to advocate?" As she stated, this was action not only for oneself but also to support and help others. Taking action was an aspect of this theme, with such action grounded in our belief systems and values. The theme of removing selfishness and putting trust in our higher power was described as *FROG* (fully rely on God). This Christian phrase described the nature of our relationship with our higher power. Through our challenges and struggles we sought to rely on our higher power, which provided strength to move forward. One participant wrote, "I have faith and trust that God is placing me where I need to go. I know that the Spirit is guiding me."

We chose the Yiddish word *Chutzpah* to describe the action orientation theme of being authentic. While it can have a negative connotation within Jewish culture, we felt it emphasized the brazen bold stance that it takes to be authentic, which often may not be supported by others. Saying that someone has a lot of *Chutzpah* is equivalent to the phrase, "They've got a lot of nerve" with an underlying tone of respect or disrespect. It additionally touches on the cultural norm and expectations of Jewish women. Our definition of *Chutzpah* described the intentionality of refusing to be silent, pushing past fear and shame to bring the entirety of one's true self to the moment. The final theme, *integrated identity,* was a description of our expanded vision from within to gain a larger and more holistic perspective. The journey we experienced was one of finding an authentic place within the counseling profession and an ownership and recognition of our individual and collective spiritual paths. The vision of the journey was described as "loving peace and acceptance with where my journey was headed."

The four dimensions of **painful experiences**, **learning and awareness**, **connect vs. disconnect**, and **velocity** were each integral to our respective and collective journey. Each dimension was a broader category for the individual themes that are descriptive of this journey. We recognized that our experience as doctoral students with spiritual and religious identities were unique, and we hope others may find validation and support through understanding our shared experience. Our research study and group process experience provided much more than

specific themes, it was a valuable experience that we all cherish. Godspeed to all those embarking on the journey.

In summary, **Painful Experiences** were at the forefront of our initial sharing and data collection. There was a depth of pain, hurt, and sorrow in this dimension that emerged from the four themes within this dimension of *misunderstood, judgment*, *stuck*, and *not fit for the profession*. Next was the dimension of **Learning and Awareness**. The themes described within this dimension promoted personal and professional growth and were *divine nature*, *cultural competence*, *risk taking*, and *authenticity*. Throughout our experiences we were moving towards connection or moving away from connection with others described by the third dimension, **Connect vs. Disconnect**. This was not a continuum but rather a dichotomous directionality we experienced in our relationships with others, the profession, and our spiritual and religious beliefs. This dimension contained the themes of *wakan tanka tunkashila*, *relationship with others*, *holding space, silent*, and *anger and isolation*. The fourth dimension was labeled **Velocity,** which embodies the action and movement of the themes, *empowerment, FROG, Chutzpah,* and *integrated identity* which were all included in this dimension. As we came to understand our individual experiences, the aspect of us being on journey was clear. The individual journeys were varied and each one of us could identify with the cyclical and circular nature of our collective experience. We connected with the term Godspeed to provide an overarching description of our experience and to provide encouragement for others who have closely held religious and spiritual beliefs and embark on the pursuit of a doctoral degree in counselor education.

Discussion

Our aim for this research was to gather the lived experiences of four women who represent a diverse range of religious and spiritual backgrounds during the course of their doctoral training programs in counselor education looking at religious and spiritual values and beliefs. The four participants also were the researchers for this study and provided an enriched account of their experiences using a phenomenological autoethnography method (Muncey, 2010; van Manen, 1997). Through this method, we discovered that regardless of our individual values and beliefs, we similarly described moving through our doctoral experiences. We each similarly navigated our experiences in a way that found congruence with our spiritual and religious beliefs. The descriptions of our experiences, how we navigated these experiences, and finding our respective truths throughout the doctoral program entailed universal themes that fit into four dimensions*:* **painful experiences**, **learning and awareness**, **connect vs. disconnect**, and **velocity**.

The dimension of **painful experiences** was in the forefront of the data collection process and the sharing these experiences was very difficult. We experienced others making assumptions about us, feelings of being judged, and misunderstood in relationship to our religious or spiritual beliefs and values. We felt as if our voices were not considered or heard in the classroom. We experienced feeling stuck and a lack of support from others which resulted in emotional withdrawal from others and feeling isolated. We experienced overt and covert messages that we were not fit for the profession of counseling because of our closely held religious affiliations or spiritual beliefs. The theme of painful experiences and the resulting withdrawal fits with the research showing that students are not comfortable discussing spiritual and religious topics in the classroom (Henriksen, et al, 2015; Prest et al., 1999; Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014; Souza, 2002).

Research has suggested the pivotal role spirituality and religion play in people's lives, benefitting one's wellbeing in various ways. The exploration of spirituality and religion as it pertains to counselor education has gained increasing attention in the significance it has on

counselor trainees' development. Findings from previous studies remain consistent with the current research on the importance of this component to professional counselors. Research has shown the lack of preparedness of professional counselors to work with clients on spiritual or religious concerns. As it becomes increasingly apparent of the necessity for counselor education to incorporate training into the curriculum on spiritual and religious issues, there continues to be an absence. In addition to this need for training of master's students, there is a necessary component of looking at the training of doctoral students and the training and willingness for exploring spirituality and religion within one's self as well as within one's training. Through this research, insight was gained of the reluctance for educators to include discussions or activities into the counselor training curriculum. The findings of this study include the themes found of the doctoral student participants' experiences that were occurring in classes they co-taught as well as in their own coursework.

The use of autoethnography in our research provided an outlet for speaking to the individual researcher's experience and later connecting those experiences to identify what was shared. The intimacy of the participant's data collected and the researcher's ability to remain objective can be seen as two conflicting pieces. A limitation of autoethnography that we as researchers continued to attend to the importance of remaining objective in evaluating the data and determining what qualified as a theme. Acknowledgement of ethics is also a limitation in autoethnography as it can be questioned to have the participant serving as the researcher. The closeness of the participant-researcher role in autoethnography speaks to the intentionality and value researchers place on the ethical implications of this research.

Learning and awareness occurred as we shared with one another our experiences and recognized the divine nature that we each uniquely feel and have navigated integrating our spiritual identities with our counselor educator identities within our doctoral training. The significance of managing our cultural competence for our differing beliefs created a climate of openness and the practice of loving others regardless of our differing views and beliefs, while remaining open to sharing and being willing to have courageous dialogues. In addition, risk taking created a space of genuine and authentic encounters with one another, sharing intimate parts of our stories in relationship to the research topic.

In the dimension of **Connect vs. Disconnect**, we experienced times of connection and other times of disconnection. These experiences were related to our relationship to a higher power (described as Wakan Tanka Tunkashila) and our experience in relationship with others. There was a sense of fear in the experience of disconnection. Feeling fearful caused the inability to bring one's authentic self to the relationship and learning environment. The disconnect led to the feeling of anger by not feeling heard and feeling disrespected. This resulted in isolation and the feeling of being alone in our experience, which brought the feeling of not being fit for our profession. This experience of disconnection and not knowing how to have conversations centered around these topics speaks to the unpreparedness that professional counselors experience in addressing spiritual or religious issues (Adams, 2012; Briggs & Rayle, 2005; Hall et al., 2014; Hickson, Housley, & Wages, 2000; Young, Wiggins-Frame, & Cashwell, 2007).

Empowerment was experienced in relationship with the other participants, which served as a reminder to return to one's faith and be gentle when responding to the reactions they were having to comments and actions or no actions occurring in their department. Making the decision to Fully Rely On God (FROG) and put into action the advocacy piece of being willing to show up and have conversations surrounding religion and spirituality. This decision speaks to the process of remembering to walk in alignment with our spiritual paths and the higher purpose for the work and our chosen paths. This aligns with the findings of counseling students discovering a sense of calling through their work as a part of one's spiritual path (Hall, Burkholder, & Sterner, 2014).

The phrase Chutzpah was a phrase the researcher-participants utilized for the act of being bold and speaking up even if it meant disagreeing with the majority. The vitality that is experienced when students are invited to bring their full selves to the classroom, which includes their spiritual selves, and be able to dialogue about how their religious or spiritual beliefs support or prohibit their work with clients speaks to the necessity for this component to be included in counselor education programs (Bishop, Avila-Juarbe, & Thumme, 2003; Briggs & Rayle, 2005; Cashwell & Young, 2004; CACREP, 2014; Curtis & Glass, 2002; Dobmeier & Reiner, 2012; Fukuyama & Sevig, 1997; Hagedorn & Gutierrez, 2009; Ingersoll, 1997; Kelly, 1994; Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2014; Pate & Hall, 2005; Polanski, 2003; Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014; Young, Cashwell, Frame, & Belaire, 2002).

It is important to confront the dilemma of what is preventing students from being willing to discuss topics related to spirituality and religion (Prest et al., 1999; Souza, 2002) and the criticality of exploring their own spiritual nature and how this impacts the therapeutic relationship (Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014). **Velocity** addressed the notion of moving forward and gaining momentum in the context of developing a more holistic perspective into our experience as participants and researchers to the discussion surrounding religion and spirituality. This holistic experience resulted in a more integrated identity and willingness to have difficult yet critical dialogues surrounding religion and spirituality.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this research needing to be acknowledged. The results and recommendations of this research reflected the subjective lived experiences of four counselor education doctoral students who participated in the study. The participants attended the same program and received the same training on qualitative research from the same instructor, which may be a limitation. Another limitation may be that the identified themes are only central to one particular counselor education program and that the physical locations of the northwestern United States may have been a factor. There may also be cultural, political, and economic values that contribute to our experiences and personal factors of the faculty and other doctoral students that contributed to our experiences. Perhaps if other participants with different religious orientations not included in this research would have been participants, the themes may have been different or there may not have been researcher-participant consensus.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

When the results of this study were integrated with existing literature (Prest et al., 1999; Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014; Souza, 2002), there appeared to be prominent themes that speak to the topic of incorporating religious and spiritual dialogue into counselor education. As Walker, Gorsuch, and Tan (2004) found counselors to be less affiliated with religious or spiritual practices, this potentially speaks to the absence in dialogue that is occurring within counselor education on topics related to religion and spirituality. With awareness of this absence, there is the opportunity for counselor educators to invite more of this dialogue to occur within the curriculum being taught as well as the knowledge being brought in by our students. Allowing students to bring more of themselves to the classroom and speak to their religious or spiritual beliefs supports the students' growth and practice of reflexivity. Educators who are willing to explore how religion and spirituality connect or does not connect for them individually, there is a greater likelihood of creating motivation to learn more about how what is occurring in society related to these topics and how it impacts the work of counselors, and how to incorporate these types of dialogues into the classroom by inviting for everyone's voice to be heard. The results of this study can also be utilized to encourage the training of counselor

educators to be aware of how these concerns impact their doctoral students and the program as a whole.

Directions for future research could explore the specific themes found within this research study. This study could be replicated in other regions with other doctoral programs in counselor education. It would also be interesting to explore the experiences of other mental health profession doctoral programs to see if there are any similarities. A quantitative study could be utilized to ascertain whether the identified themes could be generalized to all doctoral students in counselor education programs. Other populations could be examined such as master's and doctoral students, pre-tenured faculty, and tenured faculty at multiple institutions. Researchers could expand the sampling of research participants to include a diverse range of religious and spiritual orientations. Additionally, researchers could expand the sampling to include programs that are solely campus, blended, and fully online to reach a diverse range of student or faculty populations.

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