"PUTTING MY BEST SELF FORWARD:"

AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SELF-CARE AMONG

GRADUATE STUDENTS IN APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Unmanaged personal and professional stress has been identified as having deleterious effects on the physical and psychological health of professionals working in the field of applied psychology. A result of increased awareness of practitioner stress within the field has led to a growing body of literature promoting self-care and wellness among this population, reinforcing the value of self-care approaches as a means of ensuring personal and professional wellness and vitality. While self-care is increasingly recognized as a valuable component of well-being in the field of psychology, research on self-care among graduate students in applied psychology remains relatively limited. The current study provided a means to examine the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. Five graduate students of an applied psychology program ranging in age from 28 to 47 years, participated in this study. Data were collected through individual interviews which were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2009). Two super-ordinate themes emerged: *Self-Care: A Composition of Layers* with the sub-themes *Recognizing Vulnerability*, *Prioritizing Self*, *Paradigm Shift*, and *Laying the Foundation*; and *Challenges of Self-Care: Obstacles to Prioritizing and Maintaining Self-Care* with the sub-themes *Time Poverty,* and *Guilt*. The themes describe the self-care experiences of the students, highlighting the vulnerability of graduate students in applied psychology to stress, support the importance of intentionally taking time for self to address self-care needs, reinforce the value of engaging in approaches helpful in combatting stress and promoting optimal functioning, and draw attention to the challenges that come with incorporating a lifestyle of self-care during graduate school. Considerations for research and practice are identified.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to examine the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. A growing body of literature addresses not only the personal and professional stress that many practicing psychologists experience, but also the importance of self-care for maintaining well-being. However, there is a dearth of research examining experiences of graduate students in applied psychology regarding the role of self-care in managing the impact of stress. The current study provided a means to ask participants specifically about these experiences. Therefore, the research question for this study was: What are the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress?

Prevalence of Stress

The work of applied psychologists is often emotionally charged and can be extremely stressful. It is expected that applied psychologists develop approaches to take care of themselves to prevent stress that can affect their personal and professional judgement (Morrissey & Reddy, 2006). Despite efforts by the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) and the American Psychological Association (APA) to address personal and professional stress among applied psychologists through self-care, research suggests that stress remains a significant problem in the field of applied psychology.

Literature exploring stress among practicing psychologists describes high levels of both personal and work-related stress and emotional exhaustion, with positive correlations emerging between stress and impaired judgment. For example, an American exploratory study by Deutsch (1985) solicited self-report data on experiences of personal problems and

treatment among mental health professionals. A mailing list was compiled of 642 potential subjects and a questionnaire on personal problems of therapists was sent to each potential subject. The names were drawn from mental health center directories, psychiatric hospital and ward staff rosters, university counselling center staff lists, and telephone directory entries in an attempt to reach all therapists in the state of Iowa. The final sample consisted of 264 therapists, yielding a response rate of 49%. Over three fourths of the subjects (82%) reported having relationship difficulties, and 125 (47% of all subjects) had sought therapy for relationship problems (Deutsch, 1985). The figures for depression were also substantial, with 57% reporting depression at some time in their lives (Deutsch, 1985). Over one fourth of the sample had been in therapy for depression, and 11% had taken medication to mitigate symptoms of anxiety and depression (Deutsch, 1985).

In another study, Ackerley, Burnell, Holder, and Kurdek (1988) solicited doctoral-level practicing psychologist experiences of professional stress. 1,589 American Psychological Association (APA) members from the membership directory were mailed a packet containing the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and the Psychologist's Burnout Inventory. Of the sample, 562 individuals (35.37%) responded. The authors found that 39.9% of respondent psychologists were experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion; 34.3% were also experiencing high levels of depersonalization. In light of the fact that such a large percentage of the clinicians were experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, 21.0% of the subjects indicated that they would choose a career unrelated to psychology if they were to start their careers over again (Ackerley et al., 1988). A closer look at the sample of licensed psychologists revealed that younger psychologists experienced more emotional exhaustion than did their older colleagues.

A study by Sherman and Thelen (1998) supported the findings of Deutsch and Ackerley. In this American survey study, 522 practicing psychologists (52.2%) completed a mail survey on stress. Sherman and Thelen (1998) found that life events such as relationship problems or major personal illness or injury caused psychologists to feel significant stress. Specifically, Sherman and Thelen (1998) found that clinical psychologists tend to feel less satisfied in their lives when dealing with their own stressful life events. This dissatisfaction can affect work, resulting in cancelled, late, and missed therapy sessions, a reduced ability to be empathetic, and an inability to meet the basic requirements of the job (Sherman & Thelen, 1998).

Negative Effects of Stress

Unmanaged personal and professional stress can have deleterious effects on the physical and psychological health of applied psychologists and can lead to severe problems and conflicts (Schure, Christopher, & Christopher, 2008). The CPA (2017) directly addresses this issue in the *Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists*. Ethical standards II.11 and II.12 in the code state that in adhering to the Principle of Responsible Caring, it is the ethical responsibility of each psychologist to take precautionary measures when experiencing personal problems or conflicts:

> II.11) Seek appropriate help and/or discontinue scientific, teaching, supervision, or practice activity for an appropriate period of time, if a physical or psychological condition reduces their ability to benefit and not harm others; and II.12) Engage in self-care activities that help to avoid conditions (e.g., burnout, addictions) that could result in impaired judgment and interfere with their ability to benefit and not harm others. (CPA, 2017, p. 20)

These ethical standards highlight the importance of continual self-care practices and the importance of ongoing promotion of psychological wellness throughout psychologists' personal and professional careers. Failure to engage in a course of action to address relevant issues and practices can result in public scrutiny, the temporary suspension or loss of one's license, or expulsion/resignation from regulatory and professional organizations. Besides legal and ethical implications, ongoing personal and professional stress can culminate in problems with mental and physical health, relationship issues, and loss of quality of life (Schure et al., 2008).

Given the prevalence of stressed psychologists (Ackerley et al., 1988; Deutsch, 1985; Sherman & Thelen, 1998), there is increased attention on providing a more comprehensive picture of the potential issues and obstacles applied psychologists face during different phases of their career, and how these obstacles are addressed (Cummins, Massey, & Jones, 2007). The current study provided a means to explore stress and self-care as experienced by graduate students who are preparing for a career in the field of applied psychology.

Stress and Self-Care Among Graduate Students in Applied Psychology

Graduate students in applied psychology are presented with diverse challenges, demands, and stressors that affect their quality of life (Carter & Barnett, 2014). They are called upon to begin navigating the transition into graduate school, adjusting to and balancing personal and professional roles simultaneously, carrying heavy workloads, dealing with challenging research projects, facing financial constraints, maintaining family relationships and responsibilities, and are exposed to client's traumatic material during practicums (Carter & Barnett, 2014). Unlike many other graduate-level programs, the participants from the M. Ed School and Counselling Psychology program are unique in some of the stressors they

face. They are enrolled in a two-year full-time thesis program that integrates research and practice and is notable across Canada in providing training in both school psychology and counselling psychology. The students complete a program with a high number of credit units, and they are required to finish an 8-month professional work practicum. Prioritizing and maintaining self-care to manage personal, academic, or work-related stress can be a struggle for these students as there are often not enough hours in a day to accomplish everything that needs to be done, let alone what one would like to do. Carter and Barnett (2014) refer to this as an impossible situation. Covey (1989) highlights the paradox and irony of self-care:

> Suppose you came upon a man in the woods working feverishly to saw down a tree. "What are you doing?" you ask. "Can't you see?" comes the impatient reply. "I'm sawing down this tree." You exclaim: "You look exhausted!" "How long have you been at it?" The man replies: "Over five hours, and I'm beat! This is hard work." You inquire: "Well, why don't you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen that saw? I'm sure it would go a lot better." The man replies emphatically: "I don't have time to sharpen the saw. I'm too busy sawing!" (p. 287)

Despite personal, academic, or work-related stress experienced by graduate students in applied psychology, there are few studies that investigate the role of self-care in managing stress as they prepare for a career where it is a common occurrence.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research project was to examine the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. Five students who self-identified as having personal, academic, or work-related stress during graduate studies in applied psychology participated in this study. They shared with me

their rich narratives about their experiences with stress and self-care. As mentioned, a picture

of the stress applied psychologists face while already working in the field, and how these

obstacles are addressed through self-care has appeared in current literature; however,

literature has not adequately explored stress and self-care as experienced by graduate

students who are preparing for a career in the field of applied psychology (Cummins,

Massey, & Jones, 2007). The current study provided a means to ask participants specifically

about these experiences. Therefore, the research question for this study was: What are the

self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal,

academic, or work-related stress?

Personal Interest

This project stems from a personal interest in the promotion of self-care and wellness

among graduate students in applied psychology. As a graduate student entering the field of

applied psychology, the importance of understanding self-care and wellness was never on my

'radar.' I considered myself to be smart, competent, and able to adjust to any stressors and

challenges I may encounter. However, during my graduate studies, two personal experiences

influenced my interest in this issue.

During my second year of study, I supervised first year graduate students completing

video-taped counselling sessions. During the debrief component of these sessions students

regularly expressed concerns about stress resulting from academic burdens, feeling

overworked, financial pressures, and family/relationship strain. I was excited that these

students were discussing their struggles and challenges, but equally perplexed about the lack

of dialogue about how they were addressing self-care to manage their stress. Personally, I

wanted to know more about their self-care experiences in managing the personal, academic, or work-related stress they were experiencing as a graduate student in applied psychology.

My own personal struggles as a graduate student have also influenced my decision to examine the phenomenon of self-care among graduate students in applied psychology. Upon completion of my graduate school coursework, I took a job as a school counsellor, while continuing to work on the thesis component of my studies. Working in the role of school counsellor, I began developing a deeper understanding of the intense nature of the work. Through conversations with my colleagues, I recognized that feeling overwhelmed or stressed is not an uncommon experience for mental health professionals working in the field of applied psychology, who are dealing with emotionally taxing personal and professional situations. Hearing that others felt the same way helped me to feel normal.

During this time, my partner and mother of our three children was diagnosed with cancer. Under the burden of a multitude of stressors, I began to struggle to find ways to balance personal, academic, and work-related obligations. I became increasingly exhausted due to the excessive demands on my energy, strength, and resources, which in turn negatively affected my vitality, purpose, self-concept, and attitudes towards life. I wondered how other graduate students in applied psychology who had similar experiences navigated the high levels of stress, and the decisions they made regarding self-care and wellness in their lives.

As a result of these experiences, I developed an interest in the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology. However, I found a dearth of research in the literature regarding this topic. Thus, this project was derived from a need to explore the self-

care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress.

My own experience with stress during graduate school and the struggle to prioritize and maintain ongoing self-care allowed me to have my own perspective on these difficulties leading to an increased amount of compassion for my participants. However, being close to the research topic, I realized that I could potentially carry assumptions about the self-care experiences of the graduate students in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. To bracket my assumptions and to ensure that I remained close to the data to view it from the participants' perspective, I continually engaged with the process of reflexivity by becoming aware of any preconceptions that I had in order to safeguard against biasing the data. I examined the data with the participants in mind and made sure to see the experience from the participant's perspectives and not my own. Throughout the analysis I noticed that themes were emerging that were surprising to me. Having themes that are surprising enhances the validity and quality of a study (Ahern, 1999).

Definition of Key Terms

Applied Psychology. Applied psychology describes the use of psychological principles, concepts, and theories to help clients, and/or patients manage or resolve emotional distress, psychological disorders, and/or mental illnesses. The following psychological branches use applied psychology concepts, methods, and principles to provide mental health services to clients and/or patients: counselling psychology, school psychology, and clinical psychology.

Stress. Stress can be considered a physiological response to a stressor, or an adverse circumstance in the environment leading to what is commonly known as the 'fight-or-flight' response (Selye, 1993). It has been defined as a state of emotional or mental strain or tension

resulting from very demanding circumstances. A widely adopted conceptualization of stress

by psychologists describe it as a real or perceived imbalance between environmental

demands required for survival and an individual's capacity to adapt to those requirements

(Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Distress. Distress is characterized as a subjective experience of unpleasant feelings,

emotions, or intense stress. If left unchecked, it may impact a person's level of functioning

personally and professionally (Sherman, 1996).

Impairment. Impairment is characterized as encompassing diminished functioning,

attributable to personal stress, burnout, substance abuse, mental illness, and physical and

emotional limitations (Forrest, Elman, Gizara, & Vacha-Haase, 1999; Thoreson, Miller, &

Krauskopf, 1989; Thoreson, Nathan, Skorina, & Kilburg, 1983).

Vicarious Traumatization. Vicarious traumatization describes the increasingly negative

shift that can occur in helping professionals' worldviews and sense of meaning of

themselves, others, and the world, as a result of exposure to the graphic and/or traumatic

material of their clients (Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996).

Burnout. Burnout has been defined as "to fail, wear out or become exhausted by making

excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources" (Freudenberger, 1974, p. 159). Bickley

(1998) defines burnout as "excessive and repeated exposure to stress, without effective self-

care" (p. 115).

Self-Care. Self-care has been defined as a means of shifting the focus beyond the awareness

of stress, to increasing engagement in behaviors that maintain and promote physical,

emotional, social, and spiritual well-being. This may include factors such as sleep, exercise,

using social supports, emotional regulation strategies, and mindfulness practices (Myers,

Sweeney, Popick, Wesley, Bordfeld, & Fingerhut, 2012). Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2001) describe self-care as a journey that requires self-nurturance of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of one's self. Neff and Knox (2017) suggest self-care can also take the form of meeting our own needs through self-compassion, which involves relating to oneself with care and support when we suffer.

Wellness. Wellness is both a psychological and social construct defined by Day and Qing (2009) as a "dynamic state, in which the individual is able to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others, and contribute to their community" (p. 15). Myers, Sweeney, and Witmer (2000) defined wellness as "a way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being, in which body, mind, and spirit are integrated by the individual to live life more fully (p. 252). Perceived wellness is typically present when an individual experiences consistent and balanced growth in wellness dimensions that pertains to the physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual realms (Harris, Martin, & Martin, 2013).

Secondary Trauma. Secondary trauma refers to a set of psychological symptoms that mimic post-traumatic stress disorder but is acquired through exposure to persons suffering the effects of trauma (Elwood, Mott, Lohr, & Galovski, 2011). The development of secondary trauma is recognized as a common occupational hazard for professionals working with traumatized people (Baird & Kracen, 2006, Figley, 1995).

Self-Compassion. Neff and Knox (2017) define self-compassion as consisting of three central components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. These elements combine and mutually interact to create a self-compassionate frame of mind when encountering experiences of life difficulty (Neff & Knox, 2017).

Thesis Organization

This thesis contains five distinct chapters. Chapter one provides a brief overview of the current research on the prevalence and negative impacts of stress among professionals working in applied psychology, the purpose of the current research, researcher background and definitions of key terms. Chapter two presents a historical overview of stress among professionals who work in the field of applied psychology, a definition of stress in applied psychology, vulnerability of graduate students in applied psychology to stress, self-care and wellness among professionals who work in the field of applied psychology, self-care and wellness for graduate students in applied psychology, and supports for graduate students in applied psychology regarding self-care. Chapter three describes the methodological approach of IPA, data collection procedures, data analysis, and how the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research was established. Chapter four presents the findings; introducing the participants and reporting on the two super-ordinate themes that emerged from the data analysis: *Self-Care: A Composition of Layers* with the sub-themes *Recognizing Vulnerability*, *Prioritizing Self*, *Paradigm Shift*, and *Laying the Foundation*; and *Self-Care Challenges: Obstacles to Prioritizing and Maintaining Self-Care* with the sub-themes *Time Poverty,* and *Guilt*. Finally, chapter five integrates the findings from the current study into the existing body of literature, reviews the strengths and limitations of the study, presents considerations for future research, practice, and training and concludes with my personal reflection of the research process.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature related to stress and self-care in applied psychology is divided into six major sections. The research will pertain to applied psychology when referring to stress, self-care, and wellness, unless otherwise noted. Section one discusses the historical overview of stress among professionals who practice in the field. Section two focuses on the definition of stress. Section three examines the vulnerability of graduate students to stress. Section four discusses the shift towards self-care and wellness to manage stress among professionals who practice in the field. Section five focuses on self-care and wellness among graduate students. Section six examines support systems for graduate students regarding self-care and wellness. It is important to note that the current study uses the term "applied psychology" as an umbrella term to describe the use of psychological principles, concepts, and theories to help clients, and/or patients manage or resolve emotional distress, psychological disorders, and/or mental illnesses. The following psychological branches use applied psychology concepts, methods, and principles to provide mental health services to clients and/or patients: counselling psychology, school psychology, and clinical psychology.

Historical Overview of Stress Among Professionals Who Practice Applied Psychology

The debilitating effects of stress have long been recognized as an occupational hazard (Freudenberger & Robbins, 1979). While many healthcare professionals – such as nurses, dentists, and physicians - began to address stress in the 1970's, psychology's efforts to look at issues of stress within its members lagged behind (Smith & Moss, 2009). Systematic efforts to address the issues of stress among psychologists took root in the early 1980's out of the need to respond to increased public awareness about mental health professionals' experiences of stress (Kirschebaum, 1979). In 1981, The American Psychological

Association (APA) first addressed the issue of professional stress in psychology at their annual convention (Laliotis & Grayson, 1985). The Board of Professional Affairs of the APA affirmed the responsibility of organized psychology to address the issue of stress among colleagues "who are often stressed in their work by personal conflicts that interfere with effective professional functioning and place their clients, students, and supervisees at risk" (Nathan, Fowler, & Thoreson, 1981, as cited in Laliotis & Grayson, 1985, p. 84).

Pursuant to this affirmation, the American Psychological Association (APA) established the Steering Committee on Distressed Psychologists in 1981, a group of psychologists designated with the task of determining how to support stressed APA member psychologists (Laliotis & Grayson, 1985). The committee drafted a proposal for an APA sponsored non-profit program, Volunteers in Psychology (VIP). The VIP's main objective was to offer a range of supportive services to stressed psychologists dealing with personal and professional conflicts (Kilburg, Nathan, & Thoreson, 1986).

Undertakings to more adequately address stress among its members occurred in 1986 with the establishment of the Advisory Committee on Impaired Psychologists (Smith & Moss, 2009). The decision was made to place the responsibility of addressing these issues under the jurisdiction of state/provincial/territorial psychological associations (SPTAs), with the APA serving as a consultant (Kilburg et al., 1986). The goals of this committee ultimately shifted to addressing stress and impairment through education, encouragement, and empowering the profession to enhance the health and wellness of psychologists, as reflected in its name change to the Advisory Committee on Colleague Assistance (ACCA).

While the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) had adopted a similar standard and common language on the topic of stress among its members, in 1986 the CPA moved to

evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the APA model and consider their own needs and expectations regarding stress, as well as other issues integral to the profession (Sinclair, 2011). This resulted in its own "made-in-Canada" framework, the first Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (Sinclair, 2020). The Canadian Code of Ethics offered an opportunity to rethink principles related to stress, ultimately developing objectives around the principles of Responsible Caring, which gave more explicit guidelines for addressing stress through self-care (Sinclair, 2011). The principle being that self-care is an ethical imperative for psychologists necessitating a continuous, proactive engagement in behaviors that promote psychological, emotional, and physical wellness (Maranzan et al., 2018; Sinclair, 2011).

Currently, both the American Psychological Association and the Canadian Psychological Association mandate attention to the issues of professional stress among its members, stating that it is the ethical responsibility of every psychologist to seek consultation or assistance when experiencing personal problems or conflicts to avoid conditions that could result in impaired judgment and interfere with the ability to benefit and not harm others (APA, 2017; Barnett & Hilliard, 2001; CPA, 2017). Smith and Moss (2009) go a step further, advocating for ongoing efforts to educate and inform psychologists about the pernicious effects of stress and impairment on both practitioners and clients through newsletters, email lists, continuing education activities, convention programming, and workshops. They also suggest licensure boards work together to draft changes to licensure laws so that ongoing continuing education will be mandated. Mandating continuing education regarding stress, impairment, and self-care in each licensure renewal cycle "would at least provide psychologists with minimal exposure to these issues and would hopefully sensitize them to the importance of actively addressing them on an ongoing basis" (Smith & Moss, 2009, p. 9).

While Smith and Moss (2009) provide several helpful recommendations, challenges must be noted. First, the assertion that such recommendations may help ameliorate stress and impairment is unknown, as no evidence on the outcomes has been collected. Second, every situation is different, and it may not be possible to create a set of guidelines that will be appropriate for all people in all situations. Third, it is up to psychologists to determine the best approach for addressing these issues. Consultation with and among colleagues can assist in making such determinations. Fourth, licensure boards may not have the available resources to implement such services/supports. Despite this, Smith and Moss (2009) identify some encouraging first steps towards reducing psychologist stress and impairment.

Definition of Stress in Applied Psychology

The word stress was coined by Hans Selye (1965), who defined stress as the non-specific responses of the body to any demand for change. Almost a decade later, in 1974, he redefined the terminology to establish a clarification between two different types of stress; negative stress (bad stress), and good stress (eustress). Stress is a concept that has since become entrenched in the everyday lives and vocabularies of people around the world. By making a distinction between the two faces of stress, Selye sought to show that stress, while being a reaction to a stressor, should not always be linked to negative scenarios (Venkatesh & Ram, 2015).

Negative stress may be understood as a state of tension experienced by individuals facing extraordinary demands and the pressures of modern life, which can lead to emotional and physical imbalances (Venkatesh & Ram, 2015). However, stress is not always unpleasant, and according to Selye (1965), eustress has emotional and physical benefits. Eustress acts in a positive manner for an individual and can indicate a situation where the

individual is in balance or within tolerable limits. There is, in fact, evidence that moderate amounts of stress can act in a constructive or energizing way and can increase creativity and encourage diligence in one's work (Venkatesh & Ram, 2015). While this research study highlights that there is a difference between negative stress (bad stress) and good stress (eustress), it uses the term stress to describe negative situations, or simply, an interruption in optimal functioning in response to taxing demands.

Everyone experiences stress at various points over the course of their lives. Stress will induce physical, cognitive, and emotional changes in individuals to varying degrees, relative to the individual and the level of stress (Sapolsky, 2004; Thoreson, Miller, & Krauskopf, 1989). Like everyone, professionals working as applied psychologists experience the stress of everyday life, as well as stress related to the unique characteristics of their work (Pope, Tabachnick, & Keith-Spiegel, 1987). Most of the existing evidence suggests that applied psychologists experience as much or more stress than the general public (Guy, 1987; Nathan, 1986). In addition to universal stressors (i.e., financial issues, family/relationship difficulties, and personal health), there are specific stressors commonly experienced by applied psychologists (Sherman, 1996). Work-related stressors include repeated exposure to emotionally difficult material which can result in vicarious traumatization (McCann & Perlman, 1990; Newell, Nelson-Gardell, & MacNeil, 2016), actively repressing one's own emotional response, limited availability of time to effectively address self-care and wellness (Carter & Barnett, 2014), as well as limited access to specialized professional services (Barnett & Cooper, 2009). In these circumstances, applied psychologists are likely to become stressed which can have both personal and professional ramifications (Thoreson et al., 1989).

Like their professional peers who are already established in the field of applied

psychology, graduate students in training are also susceptible to stress which can have both personal, academic, or work-related repercussions. According to Australian researchers Finlay-Jones, Rees, and Kane (2015), as many as 40-73% of trainee and practicing applied psychologists report levels of stress which have been linked to a range of negative outcomes, including decreased quality of care provided to their clients (Barnett, Baker, Elman, & Schoener, 2007).

Stress, as discussed here, is characterized as a state of emotional or mental strain or tension resulting from very demanding circumstances. A widely adopted conceptualization of stress by psychologists defines it as "a real or perceived imbalance between environmental demands required for survival and an individual's capacity to adapt to those requirements" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). If left unchecked, stress may impact a professional's level of functioning, which can have ramifications on therapeutic effectiveness (Barnett, Baker, Elman, & Schoener, 2007; Barnett & Cooper, 2009; Sherman, 1996; Smith & Moss, 2009). Although personal and professional stress may not always result in impairment, recognizing the impact of stress is essential to minimizing the risk of impaired professional competence (Barnett & Cooper, 2009; Smith & Moss, 2009).

In the United States, the Advisory Committee on Colleague Assistance (ACCA) has provided an APA endorsed document for conceptualizing professional stress (APA, 2006). As indicated below, the ACCA model is intended to illustrate the progression of stress on a continuum for psychologists, and is used as an invitation to monitor and carefully manage one's own personal stresses and needs to ensure optimal professional functioning (APA, 2006):

Stress ➔Distress ➔ Impairment ➔ Improper Behavior ➔ Intervention

As the model suggests, the "vulnerabilities deriving from the particular nature of psychological practice creates stressors" that may contribute to distress, impairment, and improper behavior by professional practitioners (APA, 2006, p. 8).

Although the prevalence of stress among applied psychologists varies, stress is a common phenomenon among this population (Barnett, Baker, Elman, & Schoener, 2007; Barnett & Cooper, 2009; Sherman, 1996; Smith & Moss, 2009), thus deserving of attention and further research among graduate students who are preparing to enter the field of applied psychology. First, further research would provide a forum for education and exchange of information, developing understanding of risks, signs, prevention, and intervention at the individual and professional levels to ensure graduate student well-being is not neglected. Second, further research would enhance awareness of issues related to graduate student health and wellness. Finally, it would provide advocacy for professionals in training. All psychologists are vulnerable to compromises in their personal well-being, occupational functioning, or both (Carter & Barnett, 2014; Smith & Moss 2009). Until these issues are placed at the forefront of psychologist's in training, it is quite possible that little progress can be made to help keep them practicing safely and effectively in the present and the future.

Vulnerability of Graduate Students in Applied Psychology to Stress

Applied psychology is a field of study that focuses on employing scientific methods to identify solutions to improve or solve practical problems of human experience (Geissler, 1917). Students enrolled in a graduate program in applied psychology examine cutting-edge theories to provide solutions to real world issues for individuals, couples, families, groups, organizations, and communities. They are expected to learn the skills necessary to become competent, ethical professionals in addition to taking care of personal obligations (Carter &

Barnett, 2014). Their main challenges are navigation of the transition into graduate school, financial constraints, limited experience in the field of study or practice, the practicum/internship process and experience, challenges with research projects, taking on the responsibility of assisting those in psychological distress, vicarious traumatization (McCann & Perlman, 1990; Newell et al., 2016), personal life challenges, as well as adjustment to and balance of professional and personal roles simultaneously (Barnett & Chesney, 2009; Carter & Barnett, 2014; Dearing, Maddux, & Tangney, 2005). Over time, the level of stress in students can increase in response to ongoing challenges and may have adverse effects on their personal and professional lives (Carter & Barnett, 2014).

The literature on stress among graduate students in applied psychology remains relatively limited. Five existing studies were identified, introducing the principles of stress among graduate students in applied psychology, effects on personal and academic functioning, the adverse effect of stress on the mental health among members of this population, and common strategies used to cope with stress (Adams and Riggs, 2008; El-Ghoroury, Hassan, Galper, Sawaqdeh, & Bufka, 2012; Forrest et al., 1999; Peluso, Carleton, & Asmundson, 2011; Shen-Miller et al., 2011). These research studies are quantitative in nature, providing systematic investigations of the phenomenon by gathering quantifiable data and performing statistical techniques. However, they provide limited access to the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of research participants, and an understanding of the meaning that people ascribe to their experiences.

El-Ghoroury et al. (2012) published the results of an American quantitative survey study that examined stressors, coping strategies, and barriers to the use of wellness activities among graduate students in psychology programs in the U.S. Just over half of all students

(50.6%, n = 61) were enrolled in clinical psychology; the remaining students were enrolled in counselling psychology (15.8%, n = 26); school psychology (6.7%, n = 26); general and social psychology (both n = 11, 2.9%); industrial/organizational psychology (n = 10, 2.7%); health psychology (n = 9, 2.4%); educational psychology (n = 8, 2.1%); cognitive and developmental psychology (both n = 7, 1.9%); and family psychology (n = 6, 1.6%); (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Fields of study in psychology with less than five participants included behavioral, forensic, positive psychology, quantitative, evolutionary, geropsychology, multicultural psychology, neuroscience, sport psychology, and environmental psychology (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Using a modified version of the measures developed by the ACCA to assess stress, coping, and barriers to wellness/self-care in licensed psychology practitioners, the researchers sought to provide descriptive data addressing the following questions: (a) how many psychology graduate students report significant levels of stress, (b) what are the most frequent stressors that affect psychology graduate students, (c) what are the most common strategies used to cope with stress, and (d) what do graduate students in psychology perceive as the greatest barriers to engaging in wellness and self-care strategies. Results revealed that over 70% of psychology graduate students reported a stressor that interfered with their optimal functioning since they began graduate school (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Frequently endorsed stressors included "academic responsibilities, finances/debt, anxiety, and poor work/school-life balance" (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012, p. 122). Common coping strategies used were "support from friends, family, classmates, regular exercise, and hobbies" (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012, p. 122). The leading barriers to using wellness strategies were lack of time and cost/money (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012).

Overall, El-Ghoroury et al.'s (2012) study found that high levels of stress are normative among graduate students in applied psychology. This is significant, because it builds upon the knowledge base of what is known about the disruptive levels of stress experienced within this population. However, there are some shortcomings that should be considered when interpreting this data. Due to the survey yielding a relatively low usable response rate of 14.9%, which is notably lower than many published Internet surveys; participation bias is a possibility. Therefore, readers should be careful in generalizing the data to other groups of graduate students in psychology. Furthermore, the survey design did not permit the researchers to match individual stressors with specific barriers and coping strategies, which resulted in a lack of insight into these relationships.

Similarly, Shen-Miller et al. (2011) found nearly 50% of their survey sample of American graduate students in applied psychology programs experienced problems during their training, including impaired personal and academic functioning. Valid responses were received from 321 American Psychological Association (APA) student affiliate members, with most participants enrolled in clinical psychology programs (62.7%), compared to counseling (25.3%), school (7.0%), and combined programs (2.5%). Graduate students reported experiencing problems in the areas of professional behavior (58.5%), interpersonal skills (48.1%), clinical skills (42.5%), academic skills (31.1%), and mental health (28.3%). Graduate students reported having less difficulties with alcohol or substance abuse (18.9%), and inappropriate peer relationships (10.4%) during their training.

Additionally, Forrest et al. (1999) observed in their literature review on the topic of evaluating the competence of trainees in professional psychology programs, that personal stress, decreased professional functioning, ethical violations, and incompetence affects

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virtually every graduate program in psychology every year. El-Ghoroury et al. (2012) asserted this frequency indicated that most psychology graduate students should expect to deal with significant academic or personal stress at some point in their graduate training and need to be prepared to assess and address these concerns.

A recent quantitative survey study of universities across Canada examined depressive symptoms among Canadian psychology graduate students and across psychology graduate programs. Peluso et al. (2011) recruited participants (N = 292) from the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) student list who were currently enrolled in clinical, experimental, counselling, and educational psychology programs. Using the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) to assess symptoms, the researchers found a substantial portion of students (33%) reported clinically significant symptoms of depression. Moreover, 6% of the current sample reported depressive symptoms consistent with significant clinical impairment (Peluso et al., 2011).

While there were no major differences in levels of symptom reporting across program type on CES-D scores, there was a trend indicating students in education reported slightly higher depression scores, followed by experimental, counselling, and finally clinical students. Results of regression analyses indicated that greater current weekly hours worked, and advisory relationship satisfaction were significant predictors of depressive symptoms for students in experimental programs (Peluso et al., 2011). In contrast, depression symptoms were unrelated to hours worked, advisory relationship satisfaction, funding, and research productivity for students in all other programs (Peluso et al., 2011).

The rates of depression found in this study exceed the population prevalence rates of 12.3% (Kessler et al., 2003), while also exceeding existing rates for other university samples

(i.e., 11.3%; Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein, & Hefner, 2007). Peluso et al. (2011) assert the rates are also elevated relative to other health care providers, suggesting that psychology graduate students appear particularly vulnerable due, in part, to the myriad of stressors confronting students (e.g., financial concerns, academic performance, relationship issues, stress and burnout; which have been shown to impair a psychologist's personal and professional abilities). Peluso et al. (2011) suggest the prevalence of depression symptoms among graduate students in psychology programs warrants attention "not only to study the graduate students' experiences, but also to determine the driving factors behind these heightened levels of depression" (p. 123).

Peluso et al.'s (2011) findings are noteworthy because there is a void in the research on depression symptoms among Canadian psychology graduate students. Undergraduate students have received most of this research focus, and there is limited research available on graduate students in general. There are three relatively minor drawbacks of Peluso and colleagues' study that should be noted, but these are not of major importance to the overall impact of their findings. First, depression symptoms were measured by a self-report measure rather than through a clinical interview. Research of this nature should consider using interviews to augment self-report measures. Second, previous episodes of depression were not considered. This is important as "once an individual experiences a depressive episode, the likelihood of experiencing a recurrence is approximately 60%" (Peluso et al., 2011, p. 124). Consequently, it is difficult to determine what secondary factors (e.g., family history of depression, anxiety, other emotional disorders), if any, contributed to the presence of self-reported depressive symptoms (Peluso et al., 2011). Third, there is the possibility of sampling

bias in the study; specifically, a self-selection bias to participate by graduate students who were feeling depressed.

Given earlier research indicating significant stress responses among established therapists working in the field of applied psychology (Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995), Adams and Riggs (2008) determined it was especially important to extend investigation to graduate students training in the field of applied psychology. Adams and Riggs (2008) suggest novice practitioners are not only at risk of experiencing difficulties with stress but also vicarious traumatization during practicum training.

Following Pearlman and Saakvitne (1995), Adams and Riggs (2008) explored vicarious traumatization as a process involving a transformation in the inner experience of student therapists, resulting from empathetic engagement with clients' traumatic material, which can associatively contribute to stress, problems with professional competence, or even burnout, and in turn can influence clinical abilities and negatively impact client outcomes (Carter & Barnett, 2014; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Figley, 1995). Recruiting students from APA-accredited clinical and counselling psychology graduate programs at state universities in Texas, participants in the study (N = 129) completed the Trauma Symptom Inventory (TSI), the Defense Style Questionnaire (DSQ), and an experience questionnaire (Adams & Riggs, 2008). Over a third of the sample (38.7%; n = 50) reported a history of personal trauma. A majority of the sample (74.3%) reported some formal didactic training in trauma work, with 38.7 % (n = 50) participants reporting minimal training, and 35.6 % (n = 46) reporting substantial training. However, a full quarter of the sample (n = 33) reported working with trauma clients with no prior training related to trauma (Adams & Riggs, 2008).

Adam and Riggs' (2008) findings support the idea that novice student therapists may be more vulnerable to vicarious traumatization. As expected, student therapists with little to no experience working with traumatized clients reported significantly higher levels of impairment than those with more experience, with no significant differences noted between students with no traumatic-specific training and students with minimal training (Adams & Riggs, 2008). Adams and Riggs (2008) suggested therapists who have a minimal amount of experience providing trauma treatment encounter more difficulties related to trauma work, including increases in anxiety, shame, a sense of incompetence, and other trauma symptoms. They highlight this discrepancy as the difference between immature coping defense mechanisms that emerge early in the development of practicing therapists and the more mature coping strategies that would typically emerge later in the development of more experienced therapists (Adams & Riggs, 2008). Notably, there were also reported associations of secondary trauma among those with a personal history of trauma (Adams & Riggs, 2008).

Adams and Riggs' (2008) study extended the literature on vicarious trauma to student therapists in applied psychology; highlighting the need for students to be aware of the risks of vicarious traumatization and the need to engage in self-care strategies to ameliorate stress in their professional lives. However, it is important to emphasize that the sample was small which limits the generalizability of the findings. In addition, research using more sophisticated measures of trauma history and vicarious trauma symptoms would help further clarify the relationship between personal trauma and vicarious traumatization.

Although there is evidence of substantial stress among professionals in applied psychology in general (Haddad, Walters, & Tylee, 2007), graduate students in applied

psychology appear particularly prone, suggesting that the multiple stressors endemic to university life, such as academic pressure, financial strain, social adjustment, poor work/school-life balance, anxiety, and exposure to traumatized individuals have an adverse effect on the mental health of graduate students (Peluso et al., 2011). Given the significant frequency of graduate students in applied psychology reporting high levels of stress, it is imperative that these students continue to be vigilant in shifting their focus towards addressing self-care and wellness to develop positive wellness behaviors that sustain them over the course of their careers.

Self-Care and Wellness Among Professionals Who Practice Applied Psychology

One of the primary rewards of being a professional in the field of applied psychology is the opportunity to help people, but the drain of dealing with such challenges can be stressful and emotionally exhausting (Carter & Barnett, 2014). This issue has not gone without extensive attention in the profession. Increased awareness of stress and impairment among practitioners within the field has led to a growing body of literature promoting self-care and wellness within this population (Baker, 2003; Coster & Schwebel, 1997; Dattilio, 2015; Guy & Norcross, 2007; Norcross, 2000; Porter, 1995; Schwebel & Coster, 1998). Self-care has been proposed as a means of shifting the focus beyond the awareness of stress, to increasing the self-nurturance of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of one's self (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobsen, 2001; Myers et al., 2012). It has also been explained as an approach for increasing well-being through the promotion of healthy stress management practices and attitudes (Coster & Schwebel, 1997; Porter, 1995).

In recent years, research studies examining the topic of self-care for mental health professionals have highlighted several recommendations to reduce stress and promote a

healthy, well-rounded lifestyle. For example, Coster and Schwebel (1997) indicated several themes considered to be important contributors to the well-functioning of psychologists working in the specialty areas of clinical, counselling, and school psychology. Salient factors identified by professional psychologists included stable personal relationships and supports, a balanced life of rest, relaxation, and exercise, personal therapy, professional development, and self-awareness/monitoring. An American study by Kramen-Khan and Hansen (1998) suggested the following strategies for combating stress and enhancing personal and professional wellness among applied psychologists: maintaining a sense of humor, balancing work and play by participating in leisure activities, attending continuing education seminars, using interpersonal supports, using colleagues for case consultation, and practicing "what we preach" to clients.

Mahoney (1997) conducted a survey with 155 psychotherapy practitioners at a conference in San Francisco regarding their methods of coping with personal and professional stressors and problems, and opinions about personal therapy as a form of self-care. Pleasure reading, physical exercise, hobbies, and recreational vacations were identified as the most common forms of self-care reported. Peer supervision, prayer or meditation, and volunteer work were also frequently reported. Personal therapy, attending church services, receiving massage care, and keeping a personal diary were the least common among the reported forms of self-care (Mahoney, 1997). A large majority of respondents (87.7%) reported having experienced personal therapy, with women reporting this activity significantly more frequently than did men (Mahoney, 1997). Their average ratings of its value were very positive, but cost and accessibility were the most frequently reported barriers to participating in regular personal therapy (Mahoney, 1997).

Guy and Norcross (1998) published a guide to psychotherapist self-care illustrating

several central elements to therapist self-care and wellness. These include recognizing the

hazards and stressors of the "impossible profession," self-awareness and personal

commitment to making self-care a priority, refocusing on the rewards of the profession,

restructuring cognitions around expectations and performance, nurturing relationships inside

and outside the office, celebrating a flourishing environment at work, setting boundaries

between self and others as well as between professional and personal life, minding the

physical fundamentals of the body, sustaining healthy escapes, undergoing personal therapy,

cultivating spirituality and mission in life, and fostering creativity and growth (Guy &

Norcross, 1998).

Norcross (2000) subsequently compiled a list of 10 self-care strategies based on the

recommendations of clinicians and empirical research about the use and effectiveness of self-

care methods among psychotherapists. Many of the categories overlap with those provided in

Guy and Norcross' (1998) checklist. The suggestions included recognizing the hazards in

conducting psychotherapy, thinking about broad strategies for self-care rather than one

specific method or technique, using self-awareness and self-liberation to assess stress,

embracing strategies from diverse theoretical orientations, using stimulus control and

counterconditioning when possible, emphasizing the human element, seeking personal

therapy, avoiding wishful thinking and self-blame, diversifying activities, and appreciating

the rewards of conducting psychotherapy (Norcross, 2000).

Neff and Knox (2017) suggested self-care can also take the form of meeting our own

needs through self-compassion, which involves relating to oneself with care and support

when we suffer. Neff and Knox (2017) defined self-compassion as consisting of three central

components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. These elements combine and mutually interact to create a self-compassionate frame of mind when encountering experiences of life difficulty (Neff & Knox, 2017). Self-kindness entails being loving, gentle, and understanding toward oneself and involves actively soothing and comforting oneself in times of struggle. Self-compassion involves framing one's experiences in light of the shared human experience, accepting that all people struggle in some form or another. Instead of feeling cut off and isolated from others in times of struggles, self-compassion fosters a deep sense of belonging. Finally, self-compassion entails a balanced, mindful response to stress that neither stifles and avoids nor amplifies and ruminates on uncomfortable emotions (Neff & Knox, 2017). Neff and Knox (2017) suggested "rather than running away with the narrative or storyline of one's problems…self-compassion involves maintaining equanimity in the face of unpleasant experiences, opening up to life as it is in the present moment" (p. 1). This allows for greater emotional resilience and psychological well-being (Neff & Knox, 2017).

The research literature presented here corroborates the findings of other investigations in underscoring the demanding nature of the work in the field of applied psychology and reinforce the value of self-care approaches as a means of increasing personal and professional wellness and vitality. This statement by Pearlman (1995) illustrates the importance of assertive self-care, and how we must take care of ourselves if our self, the healing agent, is to thrive in our personal and professional lives:

Overall, we recommend that therapists do for themselves the self-nurturing, self-building things they would have their clients do. Increasing our awareness of our needs and remaining connected with our bodies, our feelings, and other people

will strengthen us as individuals and allow us to choose to do this important work. (p. 62)

Self-Care and Wellness for Graduate Students in Applied Psychology

Self-care and wellness play an important role for graduate students in applied psychology; in fact, it is a necessary aspect of taking professional responsibilities and attending to obligations (CPA, 2017), and an investment in themselves and their clients. Through graduate training, students will be asked to assist in taking care and promoting the wellness and effective functioning of those they treat; yet literature suggested that "students commit themselves to a field dedicated to the well-being of others while putting their own needs and well-being on hold, and at times overlooking them entirely" (Carter & Barnett, 2014, p. xii). Carter and Barnett (2014) asserted that it is imperative that students take an active role in recognizing the challenges and stressors of graduate school and begin practicing and incorporating a lifestyle of self-care and wellness to ensure competence now and throughout their careers.

Although relatively limited, three existing quantitative studies were accessed that discuss the implications of self-care and wellness related to stress management among graduate students in applied psychology. In a North American study by Turner et al. (2005), 363 predoctoral applied psychology interns across Canada and the United States were surveyed to identify the use and effectiveness of self-care behaviors during the internship year. Of the 35 self-care items presented to interns, 60% were used *frequently*, 37% were used *sometimes*, and 3% were used *rarely* (Turner et al., 2005). The items with the highest mean ratings for frequency represented family and friend social support, active problem

solving, and humor. The items in the lowest mean ratings for frequency were the use of therapy, the use of faith and spiritual practices, and engagement in cultural activities (Turner et al., 2005). Of the 35 self-care items presented to interns, 77% were *frequently* effective and 23% were sometimes *effective*. The items with the highest mean ratings for effectiveness were family and friend social support, seeking pleasurable experiences, humor, sleep, and exercise. The items with the lowest mean ratings for effectiveness included the use of therapy, cultural activities, faith and spiritual practices, and cognitive reframing (Turner et al., 2005). The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify the use and effectiveness of interns' self-care behaviors; however, the authors did not draw conclusions as to why the findings evolved as presented.

While Turner et al.'s (2005) study has effectively identified and documented the use and perceived effectiveness of intern's key self-care behaviors, some limitations must be noted. Their study spans two countries with participants from a multitude of internship sites. First, each site will contend with unique barriers, weaknesses, and strengths in facilitating types of self-care. The geographical locale of an internship may limit or enhance some types of self-care behaviors (e.g., attending church, seeking therapy) which may have been over/under reported or not reported at all. Second, their study does not address the types of self-care resources available at each site, as rural sites may not be able to access the same resources that urban sites can. Finally, the lack of available funds to some participants may present as a barrier to certain self-care behaviors which will impact how the participants answered the survey questions.

Turner et al. (2005) advocate for interns being "intentional about taking responsibility for addressing self-care needs" (p. 679) and begin documenting "the activities and strategies

they find helpful as well as the frequency with which they have been able to engage in these strategies" (p. 679), so they may understand and evaluate how particular strategies help to combat personal stress and promote optimal functioning.

A study by Myers et al. (2012) examined perceived stress and self-care strategies among 488 graduate students in clinical psychology across the United States. Age, relationship status, and sufficiency of income to cost of living were significantly related to perceived stress (Myers et al., 2012). Students who indicated that their household income was insufficient compared with their cost of living perceived more stress. Students who were not in a committed relationship also reported higher levels of stress than their married counterparts. Finally, older students reported perceived stress less than their younger colleagues. Specific self-care practices emerged as contributing to lower levels of perceived stress among participants (Myers et al., 2012). The results indicated that better sleep hygiene and strong social supports served as a buffer for stress among graduate students in clinical psychology. The study also suggested the frequent use of cognitive reappraisal (reevaluating stressful situations in a way that alters emotional impact) and suppression (inhibiting the expression of emotion) to regulate emotion is related to greater well-being (Myers et al., 2012).

The findings did not support the hypothesis that exercise behaviour would correlate with stress reduction. Empirically, exercise behavior has been linked to a reduction in stress in college students (Brown, 1991; Frank, Tong, Lovelo, Carrera, & Dupperly, 2008; McIntosh, Bhandari, & Holcomb, 2007). However, researchers also suggest that individual differences such as coping styles and personality may impact one's ability to psychologically benefit from exercise (Folkins & Sime, 1981). Myers et al. (2012) proposed that some

students may believe engaging in physical activity will decrease stress level, while others find that exercise, especially in the face of academic pressure, increases stress. Myers et al. (2012) suggested "given the reliability estimate of the measure in the present study, it is likely that the measure did not accurately assess exercise behavior and therefore conclusions on the impact of exercise on stress cannot be drawn" (p. 62). The relationship between stress and self-care in psychology graduate students found by Myers et al. (2012) lends further support for the importance of self-care in decreasing the negative impact of stress and provides direction for specific self-care behaviors that are related to lower stress levels in graduate students in applied psychology.

Consistent with the findings of Myers et al. (2012), Clark, Murdock, and Koetting (2009) found that having strong social support systems was related to lower levels of stress and improved well-being among graduate students in counselling psychology programs in the United States. Using survey responses from counselling psychology students (N = 284) in 53 graduate training programs, Clark et al. (2009) indicated that social support, or sense of community (SOC), may act as a method of self-care to buffer the effects of stress. Broadly defined, social support refers to the resources and interactions provided by others and/or the connection to others that help cope with stressful circumstances (Willis, & Fegan, 2001). Social support can come from a variety of sources, including family, friends, supervisors, and even pets (Clark et al., 2009). Although Clark et al.'s (2009) findings reinforce that social support can serve as a buffer for stress directly affecting the psychological well-being of students, they determined that these moderating effects can disappear under high stress situations for some students.

Neff and Knox (2017) suggested self-compassion can be an effective form of self-care for a range of populations, including university students in psychology programs, as it can buffer students against the challenges of student life and has an immense potential for helping them to thrive. Neff and Knox (2017) referenced a 2014 study of 49 female psychology students entering their first and second years at a midsized European University who participated in a 3-week self-compassion program. Results showed increased self-compassion, life satisfaction, optimism, self-efficacy, and decreased rumination and worry among the students (Smeets, Neff, Alberts, & Peters, 2014). Neff and Knox (2017) proposed students meet their self-care needs through self-compassion, which involves relating to oneself with care and support when we suffer, as it is an invaluable tool for making one's struggles easier to bear and allows for greater emotional resilience and psychological well-being.

A promising development for the promotion of self-care among graduate students in applied psychology is the publication of The Resilient Practitioner (Skovholt, 2016). In his writings on self-care and wellness, Skovholt (2016) proposed a set of guidelines that can be applied by novice student practitioners for addressing the stressors of graduate school and striking a balance in their personal and professional lives. Skovholt's (2016) model of self-care consists of twelve domains: the emotional self, the financial self, the humorous self, the loving self, the nutritious self, the physical self, the playful self, the priority-setting self, the recreational self, the relaxation-stress reduction self, the solitary self, and the spiritual or religious self. In this model, the "emotional self" refers to developing practices that create positive changes in self-qualities such as awareness, understanding, esteem, confidence, and self-compassion. The "financial self" refers to developing practices of modest spending,

moderate risk investing, high savings, and financial assertiveness to dramatically reduce stress levels, leaving time for richly meaningful life activities. The "humorous self" refers to actively laughing, being playful, telling jokes, and being humorous, which acts as a buffer against the negative effects of stress. The "loving self" refers to sustaining oneself through affectionate, nurturing, and fun relationships with others as a source of personal and professional vitality. The "nutritious self" refers to taking steps to enhance an individual's performance through nutritional practices: providing oneself with a regular eating routine, replenishing your body with water, awareness of one's hunger and thirst messages, and developing long-term perspectives towards healthy eating habits. The "physical self" refers to engaging in exercise and physical activity, which has beneficial effects across several mental-health outcomes. The "playful self" refers to engaging in and cultivating playful practices for fun and pleasure (playing golf, watching a basketball game, scuba diving, mountain climbing, lunch with friends etc.). The "priority-setting self" refers to creating boundaries around work and personal life to achieve balance. The "recreational self" refers to involvement in activities/hobbies that are fun, interesting, and absorbing, shifting away from the demands of one's own professional work. The "relaxation-stress reduction self" refers to the practice of stress-management approaches to reduce physical body response and arousal to sources of stress (relaxation training, meditation, yoga, biofeedback etc.). The "solitary self" refers to the deliberate practice of the art of solitude to remove oneself from the chaotic channels of life to refresh and renew both personally and professionally. The "spiritual or religious self" refers to nurturing a sense of connection to a Higher Power and meaning for life, but can also mean one's unique sense of connectedness to the self, others, and nature.

Skovholt (2016) advocated for the importance of striking an optimal balance between self-care and other care for novice student practitioners to maintain their personal and professional self, and their ability to foster well-being in clients. Skovholt (2016) noted that by recognizing and addressing problems or imbalance in each area of self, students in applied psychology can work towards alleviating and rectifying problems in their personal and professional lives, so they can maintain vitality across their professional lifespan.

Supports for Graduate Students in Applied Psychology Regarding Self-Care

Understanding the causes of stress and impairment and how to cope more effectively is a core competency on the journey to becoming a professional in applied psychology (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). The American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAGS) provides a webpage devoted to enriching and advocating for graduate student development, including a collection of resources and articles on self-care, balance, avoiding over-commitment, and managing anxiety (APA, 2018). One of the articles specifically addresses the topic of balance for graduate students in psychology and provides a guide for creating a balance to foster success. The author, Williams-Nickelson (2003) noted the need to allow time for self-care to rebalance life in a more gratifying and sustainable way. She suggested there are three elements of balance – meaningful work, satisfying relationships, and personal rejuvenation. As a practitioner, she advocated that students consider the following strategies to help bring balance into their lives: 1) focus on a discrete task without interruption for a period of time, then switch to another task, 2) offload some personal or optional academic responsibilities to free up time and energy, 3) rely on a support network (classmates, friends, family), 4) leverage technology for flexibility to gain control over your

schedule, and 5) commit to continuously seeking to reduce nonessential activities or habits that will free up time for self-care (Williams-Nickelson, 2003).

Similar to APAGS, the Canadian Psychological Association provides a forum on their webpage for students preparing for a career in psychology. The Student Resources section provides psychology students with valuable resources regarding their education, training and career development, including several articles addressing self-care. One of the articles addresses stressors related to psychology graduate training and provides strategies for staying healthy and avoiding burnout. The authors, Badali and Habra (2003) make the following recommendations for maintaining wellness in one's personal and professional life: 1) avoid overwork, 2) know your limits, 3) reward yourself with fun activities, 4) exercise regularly, 5) maintain a regular sleep schedule, 6) maintain a healthy diet, 7) maintain personal connections (family, friends, colleagues), 8) seek personal therapy, and 9) keep time for yourself.

Conclusion

There has been extensive progress made in the literature addressing self-care and wellness among professional psychologists in response to managing stressors in both their personal and professional lives. Yet, minimal research or theoretical literature has focused on self-care and wellness among graduate students in psychology, specifically students in applied psychology. Given the limited knowledge about self-care and wellness among graduate students in applied psychology, exploring the self-care and wellness experiences through the lenses of students offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of self-care and wellness among this population. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to utilize Interpretative Phenomenological

Analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to examine the self-care experiences of graduate

students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The following chapter will begin with a description of the methodology used, including rationale for a qualitative research design, a discussion of the constructivist epistemological paradigm, and the utilization of interpretative phenomenological analysis as a framework for examining the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. The methods used to examine this phenomenon are discussed, including participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter concludes with information detailing the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research and pertinent ethical considerations.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative methods are exploratory or descriptive in nature and aim to discover what is happening in a particular area of study (Babbie, 2012). The main goal of qualitative research is to gain a greater understanding of a phenomenon through the experiences of particular individuals or a group of people, and the meaning and significance it holds for them (Merriam, 2009). Researchers/scholars suggest that qualitative research methods provide a rich description of human experience that quantitative methods are unable to offer (McCracken, 1988; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). Quantitative research approaches emphasize objective measurements and the statistical, mathematical, or numerical analysis of data (Babbie, 2012), and are concerned with isolating and defining categories to determine relationships between specific variables or quantities from large sample sizes (Patton, 2002). Conversely, the goal of qualitative methodology is to gather descriptive information to define categories and identify themes that emerge from information rendered by a sample of participants (Fishman, 1999; McCracken, 1988).

Merriam (2009) identified four characteristics as key to understanding and conducting qualitative research. First, qualitative researchers emphasize the importance of understanding situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. Patton (1985) explained:

> Understand[ing] the nature of that setting-what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting - and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others. (p. 1)

Second, in qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis. The researcher processes the data, clarifies and summarizes material, checks with respondents for accuracy of interpretation, and explores unusual or unanticipated responses (Merriam, 2009). Third, qualitative research is an inductive process, that is, researchers use data to develop concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively testing hypotheses (Merriam, 2009). Finally, the resulting product of a qualitative inquiry is richly descriptive, as data in the form of words, quotes, field notes, or participant interviews are included to support the findings of the study (Merriam, 2009).

Existing research on self-care and wellness in applied psychology has typically been quantitative in nature and conducted with mental health professionals already established in the field. More information is needed to understand the personal and professional experiences of graduate students in applied psychology and how they navigate self-care and wellness. By exploring self-care experiences through the lenses of graduate students in applied psychology, it is possible to obtain multiple perspectives, which offers "the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice" of self-care

and wellness, because it is "focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspective of those being studied" (Merriam, 2009, p.1). Given the limited knowledge of self-care and wellness experiences of graduate students in applied psychology, utilizing an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis research design (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) is an appropriate approach for understanding the students' experiences.

Constructivist Theory

This qualitative research study is grounded in a constructivist epistemological paradigm, the position that our understanding of reality is a social construct, not an objective truth, and there exists multiple realities associated with different groups and perspectives (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The basic assumptions guiding the constructivist paradigm is that knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process, and that researchers should attempt to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it to determine their truths (Hays & Singh, 2012; Schwandt, 2000). As noted in Merriam (2009), the constructivist researcher is interested in understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved. Meaning, however, "is not discovered but constructed. Meaning does not inhere in the object, merely waiting for someone to come upon it.... Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 1998, pp.42-43).

The current study examined the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. Situated within a constructivist position, the aim was to understand participants' views of how they constructed their truths around this phenomenon. By engaging in double hermeneutic, in that

I was making sense of the participants' sense making, the reporting is based on a thoughtful focus and the careful examination of experience in the way it occurs to participants (Mertens, 2015).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to examine the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. Smith et al. (2009) stated that, "IPA is a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (p. 1). IPA was chosen as a methodology as it gives the researcher the "best opportunity to understand the innermost deliberation of the 'lived experiences' of research participants" and allows the participants to "express themselves and their 'lived experience' stories the way they see fit without any distortion" (Alase, 2017, p. 9).

IPA first developed as a theoretical orientation in the early 1990s, drawing upon the fundamental principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Shinebourne, 2011). According to Smith et al. (2009),

> IPA started in psychology and much of the early work was in health psychology. Since then it has been picked up particularly strong in clinical and counselling psychology as well as in social and educational psychology. It is not surprising that the key constituency for IPA is what can broadly be described as applied psychology, or psychology in the real world. (pp. 4-5)

IPA also acknowledges a debt to symbolic interactionism (Carter & Fuller, 2015; Denzin, 1992) with its concern for how meanings are constructed by individuals within both a personal and social world (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

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IPA research is a dynamic process with an active role of the researcher interpreting the participant's meaning of the experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Smith and Osborn (2007) describe this as using a 'double hermeneutic' or dual interpretation process, because first, the participants make meaning of their world, and second, the researcher tries to decode that meaning – make sense of the participants' meaning making (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Smith et al. (2009) suggested that the bottom line with IPA, as a tradition that is 'participant oriented,' is that the approach is most concerned with the "human lived experience, and posits that experience can be understood via an examination of the meanings which people impress upon it" (p. 34). The following sections will describe the theoretical underpinnings of IPA: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography.

Phenomenology

The first major theoretical underpinning of IPA comes from phenomenology. A significant component of phenomenological research is that it provides a descriptive, thorough, and detailed exploration of how participants make sense of their personal and social world, and the meanings particular experiences, events, and states hold for participants (Smith & Osborn, 2007). As a qualitative approach, the ideas and developments of phenomenology are associated with four leading figures – Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre – whose scholarship shaped the phenomenological aspects of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl believed that to achieve the task of phenomenology, there must be a move away from the natural attitudes, said to be people's everyday assumptions about how things are, by bracketing this off (Smith et al., 2009). For Husserl, bracketing involves putting aside our presuppositions and preconceptions of the natural world and the world of interpretation to see the phenomenon in its essence (Giorgi, 1997; Smith et al., 2009). It is "the means by

which researchers endeavor not to allow their assumptions to shape the data collection process and the persistent effort not to impose their own understanding and constructions on the data" (Ahern, 1999, p.407). Much like Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre shared their commitments to understanding our "being-in-the-world" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 18) and contributed to the view that people are in and relating to a world of objects, relationships, languages and cultures (Smith et al., 2009). Distilled from these ideas is a major goal of IPA: to interpret others as they relate to and create meaning from their everyday activities and experiences. The idea of interpretation leads to the next philosophical foundation of IPA, hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics

The second major theoretical underpinning of IPA comes from hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation, determining if it is possible to uncover the original meanings or intentions of the author and the relationship between past and present contexts (Patterson & Higgs, 2005; Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutics is particularly interested in the following questions: What are the methods and purposes of interpreting text? Is it possible to uncover the intentions or meanings of the original voice of text? What is the relation between the context of original and interpreted text? The hermeneutic philosopher Schleiermacher believed that each writer's text is shaped by conventions and expectations, which will impress a particular form of meaning upon the text that they produce (Smith et al., 2009). For Schleiermacher, interpretation is a craft or art, which if one has engaged in a detailed, comprehensive analysis, can end up with perspective of the experience that may not have been thought of by the original creator of the text (Smith et al., 2009). While IPA theory does not fully endorse this thought, IPA borrows from it,

acknowledging that for the IPA researcher, this may allow one to see how an analysis might

offer meaningful insights, which exceed the accounts of participants (Smith et al., 2009).

This is accomplished through a methodical and thorough analysis of the data, connections

created within larger data sets and discourse with psychological theory (Smith et al., 2009).

The hermeneutic circle is another concept relevant to IPA (Paterson & Higgs, 2005;

Smith et al., 2009). The significance of the hermeneutic circle is that to thoroughly

understand and interpret text involves alternating between considering a phenomenon as a

whole and as something composed of individual parts (Zweck, Paterson, & Pentland, 2008).

Zweck et al. (2008) stated "by circuitously viewing a phenomenon as a whole and as a sum

of individual parts, the researcher gains knowledge to build increasing understanding of the

experience" (p. 119). Adopting this method of interpreting data allows the IPA researcher to

visit the data through different lenses, at separate points in time, pulling out interpretations

while considering the data as a whole and as individual pieces (Smith et al., 2009). This

concept informs the methods of IPA, where there are no sequential steps in analysis but

instead responsive and recursive movements between levels of interpretation (Smith et al.,

2009).

Idiography

The third major theoretical underpinning of IPA comes from idiography. Idiography

refers to a detailed analysis of particular persons and how they make sense of a particular

phenomenon in a particular setting (Smith et al., 2009). People are *in-relation-to* phenomena,

but they also offer a unique perspective to those phenomena (Smith et al., 2009). The

fundamental principle behind the idiographic approach is an in-depth analysis of cases

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examining individual perspectives of study participants, in their unique contexts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

IPA operates as idiographic on two different levels. The first level is the depth of analysis prescribed in IPA and the amount of detail that depth brings about. The second level is the focus on understanding how a person or group of people experiences an event, process, or relationship in a particular context (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA methodology is congruent with the purpose of the current study because of the methodological focus on individual experiences with the world (Smith et al., 2009). The focus of the current study was to examine the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. This methodology was chosen because I wanted to gain an insider's perspective on this phenomenon, and IPA represents a highly useful methodology in providing a rich and nuanced insight into the experiences of research participants (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA also has limitations that are important to acknowledge. First, IPA is interpretative in nature. The use of interpretation means that the written document cannot be a true presentation of an individual's lifeworld and experience but rather is what is referred to as a double hermeneutic, a two-stage intersecting interpretation that occurs in IPA (Smith et al., 2009). The first stage is the participant trying to make sense of their world and interpreting what is happening to them. The second stage is the researcher trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world, thus making interpretations of the participant's interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). The intent is to try and understand the content and complexity of those interpretations and to represent the perspective of participants with as much accuracy as possible, however, it is important to acknowledge that

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I am interpreting participant's perspectives, not presenting them at face value. While this is not necessarily a shortcoming, it is a characteristic of IPA that must be outlined for the reader to discern what is being represented in the text.

Second, since I have experienced multiple stressors during graduate school and have struggled to maintain my own self-care and well-being, I knew I had to practice careful bracketing and personal reflexivity throughout the research process. Using journaling to write down my thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and pre-understandings, I was able to bring awareness to my own assumptions, which assisted in reminding myself that this was the participant's story, not mine, allowing me to separate myself from the data and view it from a researcher's perspective.

Participant Recruitment

Participants for this study were recruited through purposive sampling, which bases selection of participants on matching criterion specific to the study to ensure the collection of specific and detailed information (Morrow, 2005; Patton, 1990). This type of sampling frames an effective analysis of the phenomenon of interest (Smith et al., 2009). Participants were required to meet the following criteria:

1. A student of the M. Ed School and Counselling Psychology program at the
   University of Saskatchewan;

2. Are currently working in, or have completed a practicum placement as part of your
   studies during graduate school;

2. Currently living in Saskatchewan;

3. Have experienced personal, academic, or work-related stress during graduate
   school;

4. Able to speak about self-care experiences in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress during graduate school;

5. Are able to commit to a 45-90 minute individual interview conducted and audiotaped in person at the Qualitative Research Laboratory, Arts Building, University of Saskatchewan, 9 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK, S7N 0X1

I chose the selection criteria to create a fairly homogenous sample of participants for whom the research question would be meaningful, could provide insight and a particular perspective on the phenomenon under study, and to create an analysis with a detailed examination of the experiences of this particular group (Smith et al., 2009). This was done not to privilege the SCP students as the only group of participants that are interesting. Quite the contrary, by making the group as uniform as possible according to academic, theoretical, or social factors relevant to the study, I could then examine in detail the similarities and differences within the group of participants (Smith et al., 2009).

Using these criteria, participants were recruited for the study through two different methods. First, graduate students in applied psychology were solicited through an *Invitation to Participate* poster (see Appendix A: Invitation to Participate), promoting the study and inviting them to participate, provided they met the criteria. *Invitation to Participate* posters were distributed for advertisement on bulletin boards at the University Saskatchewan. Second, an announcement was placed online through the University of Saskatchewan PAWS Bulletin Board (see Appendix B: Electronic Recruitment Notice). In total, five graduate students expressed interest in the study and met the required criteria.

Smith et al. (2009) described that a small number of participants is appropriate for an IPA research design. They believe that a small number (three to six participants) is sufficient

for a Master's level thesis because it allows the researcher to study both individual cases and between cases in depth. In total, I conducted interviews with five participants. This was an ideal number, as the goal of IPA is to study a small sample in depth and not to generalize and represent the general population (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, in simple terms one is sacrificing breadth for depth (Smith & Osborn, 2009).

Individuals interested in participating in the study were asked to contact the researcher by electronic email to set up an initial screening via telephone to ensure that inclusion criteria were met (see Appendix C: Telephone Screening Guide). The purpose and methods of the study were explained to all interested candidates. If the participant met the inclusion criteria, a date and time for an interview was scheduled. Each participant was emailed a copy of the interview questions and consent form so that they had time to reflect on their answers and consent guidelines before the interview.

Interviews were conducted and audiotaped in person at the Qualitative Research Laboratory, Arts Building, University of Saskatchewan. This was a venue that was accessible for the researcher, insured privacy, and offered participants the opportunity to speak freely about their experiences. Each interview was preceded by an informal conversation to build rapport and to assist the participants in feeling comfortable to discuss their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The conversations focused on small talk, discussing the participant's background and their family. This portion of the interview was not recorded as it did not include any data that would be pertinent to the research.

After the initial conversation, ethical requirements were addressed which included a description of the interview process, signing of the consent form which outlined the purpose of the research, limits to confidentiality, choice of pseudonym for the purpose of reporting

findings, gaining permission to use excerpts of the interview in the report, gaining permission

for audio recording, and disclosure of participants' rights to withdraw from the research (see

Appendix D: Consent Form). Participants were provided with a copy of the written consent

for their personal records.

<center>**Data Generation**</center>

Data were collected from each participant using a semi-structured interview schedule

(see Appendix E: Interview Guide). The interview was open-ended and conversational, to

ensure the required depth and richness was acquired. This approach was chosen so I could

ask for more detail, delve into issues, go back and forth among important points, and request

more information to assist with clarity and to encourage the participant to elaborate further.

Each participant was debriefed after the interview and reminded that the consent form

included the contact information for myself and my supervisor should they be interested in a

copy of the final document.

Each interview audio recording was transcribed verbatim by me into a Microsoft

Word document. All identifying information was removed and labeled with pseudonyms

chosen by participants. An interview transcript review (ITR) was not incorporated into this

qualitative research study for the following reasons: (a) to protect interviewees from the

burden of participating in the ITR process, as participants may already be struggling with

time constraints (considerable time and effort is required from interviewees to participate in

ITR - transcripts can be both lengthy and cumbersome to read, and interviewees who might

wish to participate in the ITR may be negatively impacted by the time and effort required),

(b) there is an opportunity for the ITR process to no longer accurately reflect the verbal

exchange between interviewer and interviewee during the interview process, (c) spontaneous

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responses delivered in the interview setting are likely to offer different insights than

responses modified through ITR, (d) the ITR may create a systematic bias, with some more

thoughtful time-considered responses to interview questions compared with other transcripts

simply reflecting the unaltered verbal interview exchange, (e) ITR may impact interview data

quality when data are retracted by interviewees, resulting in data loss, (f) to protect

participants from a possible breach of privacy that may occur during exchange of transcribed

documents, and (g) to protect participants from the possibility of experiencing ongoing

discomfort through repeated exposure to challenging and/or difficult material (Hagens,

Dobrow, and Chafe, 2009).

Data Analysis

IPA does not have a single prescribed method for analyzing data but is instead

characterized by a set of common practices and principles (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al.

(2009) described IPA data analysis as following an iterative and inductive process, where one

step or level of analysis often results in a reflexive return to a previous step or level with new

understanding or insight.

For the data analysis, I followed a set of six guidelines recommended by Smith et al.

(2009). The first step of analysis involved immersion in the original data through *reading*

and rereading of the transcript. I began with listening to the audio-recording, allowing me to

return to the interview experience, enter the participant's world, to understand the overall

flow and rhythm of the interview, and to begin to locate the rich and detailed sections of the

transcripts (Smith et al., 2009).

The second step, *Initial noting*, included an introductory examination of the semantic

content and language use on an exploratory level (Smith et al., 2009). A detailed set of notes

and comments was created for each interview, which had a clear phenomenological focus, and stayed close as possible to the participant's explicit meaning. Three different categories of comments were recorded: (a) descriptive comments focused on describing the content of what the participant has said, (b) linguistic comments exploring the specific use of language by the participant, and (c) conceptual comments that engaged with the transcript at a more interrogative and conceptual level (Smith et al., 2009).

The focus of the third step of analysis involved *developing emergent themes* that had begun to evolve from the data. This encompassed an attempt to produce a concise statement of what was important in the various comments attached to a piece of transcript (Smith et al., 2009). The emerging themes reflected not only the participant's original words and thoughts but also my interpretation.

The fourth step of analysis involved *searching for connections across emergent themes*. Smith et al. (2009) stated this process is not prescriptive; the researcher is encouraged to explore and innovate to map and organize themes that point to the most interesting and important aspects of the participant's account. This required me to list and move themes around to form clusters and related themes and re-organize themes which represented parallel or similar understandings (Smith et al., 2009).

Steps one through four were completed for one transcript prior to moving on to the next, which was step five, *moving to the next case*. This next step involved moving to the next participant's transcript and repeating the process. During this process I was inevitably influenced by what I had already found, however this allowed bracketing by limiting the influence of themes identified from previous transcripts and treating the next transcript on its own terms, doing justice to its own individuality (Smith et al., 2009).

The sixth and last step in the analysis process involved *looking for patterns across cases*. In this final stage, I looked for patterns across all five transcripts to form connections across the cases. During this task I asked myself questions such as "What connections are there across cases? How does a theme in one case help illuminate a different case? Which themes are the most potent?" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 101). The result of this process allowed me to group recurring or similar themes across the transcripts to create instances of higher order concepts or super-ordinate themes which the cases shared. (Smith et al., 2009).

The analysis was then written up with two purposes in mind. The first purpose was to give an account of the data, to help the reader get a sense of what the data were like. The second purpose was to offer my interpretation of the data, representing each participant and their experiences in an expressive text and providing explanations of my interpretations.

Establishing the Quality of the Research

Confusion exists over how qualitative research can be assessed. Quantitative and qualitative research have different historical roots and are based on very different concepts, yet the dominance of what constitutes valid and good quality research has often led qualitative research to be evaluated according to quantitative criteria that are designed to fit a very different paradigm (Yardley, 2011). Inevitably, the diverse methodologies and epistemologies used in qualitative research make it a challenge to create criteria that apply to each unique approach. Despite these challenges, McLeod (2011) suggested there are several verification strategies that may be used within qualitative research to assist in establishing the quality and authenticity of research. Yardley (2000) provided a set of of four essential criteria to assess the value and validity of qualitative research, which she noted are open to flexible

interpretation and variance in criterion fulfillment. These areas include sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and finally, impact and importance.

Yardley noted that good qualitative research should demonstrate sensitivity to context, which can be established in several different ways. First, there is sensitivity to the context of established literature, to gain insights from previous research in the same area or employing the same methods. In demonstrating sensitivity to context, a thorough examination of the literature exploring stress and self-care among graduate students in applied psychology was conducted (as demonstrated in chapter 2 literature review). Through this examination, I discovered the need for qualitative research that focused on the first-hand accounts of self-care among graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. These needs served as a rationale for choosing IPA as a methodology, as it gave me the "best opportunity to understand the innermost deliberation of the 'lived experiences' of research participants" and allowed the participants to "express themselves and their 'lived experience' stories the way they see fit without any distortion" (Alase, 2017, p. 9).

Additionally, Smith et al. (2009) wrote that sensitivity to context can be demonstrated through conducting a quality IPA interview, which requires empathy, ensuring the participant is comfortable, and acknowledging the participant as an experiential expert. I believe this research study carried out interviews that demonstrated the above-mentioned qualities. As a graduate student in applied psychology and a counsellor, I believe my own unique experiences and skillset helped to ensure that I showed empathy towards the participants and put each of them at ease throughout the interviews.

A second way of fulfilling sensitivity to context is through sensitivity to the data, that is, the accounts of the participant (Smith et al., 2009). In demonstrating sensitivity to the data, I used a considerable number of direct quotes from the participants throughout the written analysis of the study, presenting my own interpretations carefully and thoughtfully.

Commitment and rigour are the second criteria for establishing the value and validity of qualitative research. Commitment is demonstrated through a prolonged engagement with the research topic, development of proficiency in the research methodology, and immersion in the generated data (Yardley, 2000). Over the course of three years, I have demonstrated a commitment to the research topic by spending time reviewing the relevant literature and developing my skills as a responsive interviewer. Throughout the data generation and analysis phase of the research, I aspired to follow the guidelines of my chosen methodology and immersed myself fully in the analysis process.

Rigour can be conceptualized as the thoroughness of the study, from how the sample is congruent with the aims of the research question, to the completeness of the analysis (Smith et al., 2009). In the current research study, the research question focused on the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. I believe the sample was an appropriate fit for the research question, as demonstrated in the *Participant Recruitment* section of this document. Rigour was also demonstrated throughout the analysis and write-up by moving beyond a simple description of what was said or observed to sharing my interpretation of the data and supporting that interpretation with direct quotes (Smith et al., 2009). Providing direct quotes ensured that the interpretations were grounded in the narrative of the participants and gives the readers the ability to determine how true the interpretations are to the original source.

Transparency and coherence are the third criteria for establishing the value and validity of qualitative research. Transparency is described by Yardley (2000) as "the degree to which all relevant aspects of the research process are disclosed" (p. 222). This includes providing detail of the data collection process, steps of analysis, and presenting excerpts of the textual data, all of which is included in the *Methods* and *Findings* section of this document. To demonstrate transparency, I provided a detailed description of participant recruitment and selection, the interview process, and the analytic process. To be transparent I also included a reflection on my own experiences of the research process in the *Discussion* chapter.

Coherency refers to the congruency between the research study and the theoretical assumptions of the selected method (Smith et al., 2009). In aligning with IPA methodology, I sought in the write-up of the findings to put myself in the shoes of the reader to bring awareness to the idea that I was attempting to make sense of the participants making sense of their own experiences and was offering my interpretations thoughtfully and carefully.

Impact and importance are the final and most crucial aspect of Yardley's (2000) criteria for establishing the value and validity of qualitative research. Yardley proposed that the impact and importance of the research should be assessed in relation to the research objectives, the functions it was designed for, and the target community who could benefit from the research. The focus of the current study was to examine the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. The aim of the study was to establish a framework for participants to contribute to research in a meaningful and significant manner and provide an avenue for adding their mark on the academic landscape. I believe the current study fulfilled both the focus and function

described, providing an opportunity for the graduate students to participate, presenting **a** platform for them to share their perspectives and feelings, and contributing an analysis that generated valuable and unique insights into the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress.

Yardley (2000) makes the important point that however well a piece of research is conducted, a test of its real value and validity lies in whether it tells the reader something interesting, important or useful, which I believe rings true for the current research. Yardley (2000) suggested that a researcher who successfully navigates through these four criteria will have established the quality of the research.

Ethics

An ethics application was submitted to the Behavioural Research Ethics Board for approval of research before the study was conducted. It was approved on February 28, 2019 and renewed on February 5, 2020 (BEH approval #821). The ethics application focused on an overview of the study and assessed for confidentiality, participant recruitment, risks and benefits to participants, consent process, data security and storage. There are three ethical considerations to note within this study, including sensitivity of the topic, personal bias, and confidentiality.

To safeguard risks associated with sensitivity of the topic, I checked in with participants during the interview process to assess for negative thoughts, feelings, or emotions that may have arisen, and provided empathy and support as needed. Each participant was debriefed following completion of the interview which included sharing the thesis supervisor's contact information and a Counselling Support document noting several

counselling resources available in the community (see Appendix F: Counselling Services Sheet).

Personal bias was possible as qualitative analysis is subjective and I had been personally close to the topic of interest (Smith et al., 2009). To prevent my opinions and experiences from influencing the themes that emerged from participants' interviews, I practiced 'bracketing' (Ahern, 1999). I was mindful to be reflexive through the analysis process to prevent any preconceived ideas or notions from influencing the themes that emerged. Ahern (1999) provides direction for demonstrating an integrative reflexive bracketing to prevent subjective experiences from guiding the research. First, I self-reflected on my own journey using a journal to take note of feelings, experiences, and preconceptions. Second, I paid close attention to the process of analysis to check-in with myself and my analysis to ensure that I was looking objectively as possible. Third, I noted that new and surprising themes emerged during analysis which provided confidence that bracketing was being employed successfully.

Last, I safeguarded against risks of confidentiality breaches by keeping all identifying information confidential and by storing recorded interviews on a password protected computer. Each participant chose their own pseudonym to be used throughout the study. I ensured other identifying information was altered or omitted in the final write-up.

Summary

In summary, the current study examined the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. This qualitative research was grounded in constructivist theory, utilizing an IPA approach to collect, analyze, and render participants' experiences into descriptive interpretations (Mills,

Bonner, & Francis, 2006). In the subsequent chapters, demographics of the participants and

thematic results are presented.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. During the data analysis each transcript was read and re-read in detail, recording initial ideas and labels in the left-hand margin of the page that highlighted specific points to summarize or paraphrase responses, thus making connections and interpretations, and aiding development in the familiarity of the data. Each transcript was then re-read and emerging concepts and more abstract categories were recorded in the right-hand margin. These concepts represented the beginning of the conceptualization process.

As data accumulated and concepts became more developed, greater differentiation within categories was possible and two major themes were ultimately produced. From the texts, a list of concepts arose from the interpretative phenomenological analysis of the participants' self-care experiences. Each theme was considered in relation to individual transcripts and was confirmed or modified in relation to previous themes and instances of overlap or deviation. Consistent with the IPA approach, themes were not necessarily selected due to predominating influence but rather in relation to the richness of the participant accounts.

Brief field notes were made immediately after each interview summarizing my initial impressions and key points relating to each individual interview. The field notes were used to develop a reflective journal. The focus of the journal was firmly, in the first instance, on the learning process as I undertook the analysis, and second, an attempt to execute bracketing, suspending my own assumptions, experience, and judgements to focus on what was actually presented in the transcript data.

Results of the analysis are presented thematically throughout this chapter, with each theme supported by excerpts from the participants (Smith et al., 2009). The super-ordinate themes and sub-themes that emerged through analysis of the participants' interviews will be presented using direct quotes from the participants. The voices of the participants are maintained throughout the chapter to align with the ideographic nature of IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

Direct quotations included in this chapter were minimally altered to present the information coherently and to protect participants' anonymity. For example, ellipses (…) were used to omit data that did not relate to the phenomenon; repeated words and filler words were omitted, such as 'ah' and 'like'; and squared parenthesis ([]) were used to add additional words for coherency of the sentence. The participants chose their own pseudonym to be used to protect their identity.

This chapter begins with a contextualization of the data and an overall description of the participant pool followed by an overview of the self-care experiences of graduate students who experienced personal, academic, or work-related stress during their M. Ed. program in applied psychology. Next, two super-ordinate themes, *Self-Care: A Composition of Layers* and Self-Care Challenges: *Obstacles to Prioritizing and Maintaining Self-Care* will be described followed by their sub-themes. The chapter will conclude with a summary of results.

Contextualizing the Data

The participants for this study were three women and two men, between the ages of 28-47, who self-reported they had experienced personal, academic, or work-related stress during graduate school in applied psychology and were able to speak about their self-care

experiences in managing those stressors. At the time of initial screening and interviewing, the participants had completed practicum placements as part of their graduate studies programming and had not sought assistance for stress/crisis within the last three months, as per participation criteria.

The goal of this research was to describe the themes based on the participants' rich descriptions rather than their prevalence throughout the interviews and amongst participants; therefore, each theme may not include contributions from all participants. A theme was considered relevant if highlighted by more than half the participants (Smith et al., 2009). Although the passages chosen are represented by a common theme, the content of the passages is unique to each participant. The following is a description of each participant using the pseudonym they chose, their experience with personal, academic, or work-related stress, and an overview of their self-care experiences in managing stress.

Participant One: William

William self-reported experiencing ongoing periods of stress during graduate school and indicated there were some very "difficult aspects" of it. While reflecting on some of the challenges experienced, it was stated, "at times it felt almost like a self-preservation thing." William also described how the sheer demands of graduate school coupled with other simultaneous pressures (time constraints, mental health struggles, debt) would take a toll on his physical and mental well-being. "In many ways, I found it to be stressful. When you have all these different things demanding your time and having to juggle multiple priorities, it was very taxing."

Having experiences with anxiety and depression in the past, William shared that "it was really important to keep tabs on my own self-perception and how I was doing mental

health wise." There was a recognition that it became a "necessity" to figure out how to reassess priorities and be "more conscientious about engaging in self-care to help me find some kind of balance." Self-care for William became a really good way of "staying on an even keel, given that it can be so powerful and have such an intense impact on what I think of myself and how I relate to others."

Participant Two: Janice

For Janice, it was common to experience periods of "stress," "fatigue," and "exhaustion" during her graduate studies. The pressures of being on task, managing family, facing time constraints, and completing her graduate school program often magnified the stress for her. While recalling some of the taxing experiences during graduate school, she remembered "trying to be everything to everybody" and the stress of figuring out how "to deal with it."

For Janice, life would get so busy in graduate school that time for self-care would often be a challenge. Being a parent, spouse, and student forced her to strive for some degree of work-life balance. She sought to make self-care a "priority" for herself and the family's sake. "I know I have another part of my life that is at least as important that demands my attention and commitment."

Participant Three: Hazel

Although "many factors" (managing time, parenting, family obligations) contributed to the stress that Hazel experienced during graduate school, some of her stress was self-imposed. A certain amount of the stress Hazel experienced caused difficult situations to be regarded as a threat that promoted negative thinking and damaging self-confidence. "I would constantly be telling myself that I wasn't smart enough or I didn't work hard enough."

For Hazel, the key to managing stress was to become "proactive about self-care." Learning better ways to take care of herself involved spiritual and emotional self-care and staying connected to nature. She stated that "it's taken me time to get to this point, and I'm still making mistakes, but I am learning to manage these feelings effectively."

Participant Four: Wendy

Wendy's experience with the stress of graduate school started early in the program as she had to navigate several "challenges" in her life. She described having "some life-changing moments and everything turned upside down" and indicated "there have definitely been some hurdles along the way." The pressures of being a student and a spouse, managing ongoing extended family concerns, facing time constraints, and completing her graduate school program often increased the stress for her. With all these things "occupying" her mind, she shared that there were times when she was challenged to keep some of her "school-life and personal-life responsibilities going."

For Wendy, sustaining the art of taking care of herself had been challenging but she learned the importance of this intentional effort. She stated the need to figure out how to "schedule in the time to reconnect to the things that help me sustain my passion and energy."

Participant Five: Aaron

Aaron's experiences with stress during graduate school appeared on and off during his studies, but it was "later in the process" that he recounts as being the most difficult to navigate. "I think it was more afterwards, just working on my thesis full-time, working full-time, and searching for future employment. It's a balancing act when it comes to finding time to do everything and you don't get a lot of breaks. It's very stressful." He also described several other stressors that happened over the last year that made it "exceptionally difficult."

He stated that "there was a plethora of health issues and grieving a personal loss" that made him worry that "it's just going to fall apart."

Recognizing the peaks and valleys, lows and highs have been an integral part of Aaron's journey. One way to combat the stress he experienced had been to try and carve out time for self-care that capitalizes on his values and interests in family and friends. He developed a trusted group of friends and family members who supported him through some of his challenges and provided a listening, non-judgmental ear when he was struggling. However, he also described working feverishly to meet deadlines, so much so that he completely disregarded his own self-care. While the need for ongoing and sustained self-care was evident to Aaron, the disconnect between knowledge and action remained a struggle for him.

Self-Care Among Graduate Students in Applied Psychology:

An Overview

Each participant in the current study provided rich, descriptive narratives of their self-care experiences in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. Initially many themes emerged throughout the process of analysis. In the end, some themes were discarded if they did not provide rich descriptions of the themes, if they were only represented by one participant, and/or if they did not fit well with the super-ordinate or sub-themes. The self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress are illuminated through the super-ordinate themes of *Self-Care: A Composition of Layers* and *Self-Care Challenges: Obstacles to Prioritizing and Maintaining Self-Care*. The super-ordinate theme of *Self-Care: A Composition of Layers* can be further understood through the sub-themes of *Recognizing Vulnerability, Prioritizing Self, Paradigm*

Shift, and *Laying the Foundation.* The super-ordinate theme of *Self-Care Challenges:*

Obstacles to Prioritizing and Maintaining Self-Care can be further understood through the

sub-themes of *Time Poverty* and *Guilt* (see figure 4.1). Quotes were placed under the sub-

theme that best suited the content.

The chosen themes illuminate the participants' self-care experiences in managing

personal, academic, or work-related stress. The participants described some difficult aspects

of their experiences in graduate school, with the presence of a multitude of stressors. Hazel

described "having a few new grey hairs" from the challenges of trying to find some type of

"work/life balance," or Wendy felt like there wasn't "enough time" to do all "all the things I

need to do." Janice shared the "guilt" felt for taking time "to go and do something that would

actually make me feel good" when she should be doing "something else" like meeting the

family's needs.

Although all five participants communicated personal, academic, or work-related

experiences of stress during graduate school, their narratives also captured their self-care

experiences in trying to manage stress. Their descriptions can best be interpreted as a process

which is multi-faceted, composed of several layers. The participants' described a recognition

of their own vulnerabilities to a plethora of issues that were making their lives difficult, the

importance of consciously choosing to make themselves a priority as a way to address stress,

a paradigm shift in the way they viewed and approached the concept of self-care, and laying

the foundation for incorporating a plan to address their unique individual needs.

This section provided a highlight of the participants' self-care experiences in

managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. The following sections will further

describe each super-ordinate theme and their sub-themes with rich descriptions from the
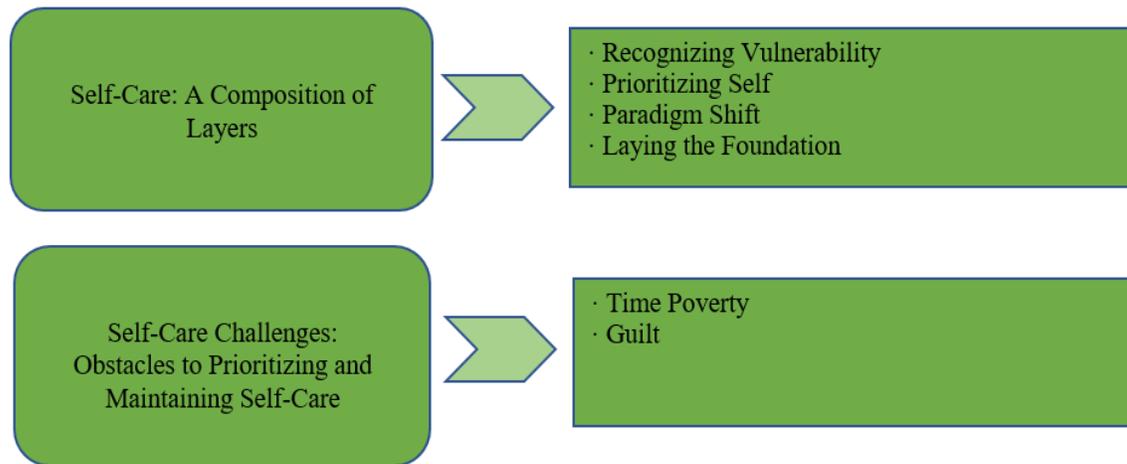
participants.

Figure 4.1 Self-Care Experiences: Summary of Super-Ordinate Themes and Sub-Themes

Self-Care: A Composition of Layers

There are several definitions of self-care produced by different academics and researchers at different times. As outlined in Chapter two, self-care has been defined as a journey that shifts the focus beyond the awareness of stress, to increasing the self-nurturance of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of one's self (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobsen, 2001; Myers et al., 2012). It has also been defined as increasing well-being through the promotion of healthy stress management practices and attitudes (Coster & Schwebel, 1997; Porter, 1995). Different definitions include or emphasize different aspects of self-care, however, what all definitions highlight is that self-care is a dynamic process. When I asked participants about their self-care experiences, it was clear that their descriptions supported the idea that self-care is not static. Their self-care experiences depicted a journey that is multi-faceted, or, as described by Hazel, composed of "several layers". When I asked Hazel what she meant by layers in relation to self-care she responded that "for me, self-care has

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been an experience that is multidimensional, it has several layers that come together to help me function more effectively and efficiently."

The use of "layers" to describe participants' self-care experiences is in honour of participant language and used to identify key elements of their experiences in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. Participants described a personal awareness of how significant levels of stress interfered with their optimal functioning, an acknowledgment of the importance of giving oneself the attention, time, and energy needed to address stress, a fundamental change in how they viewed and understood self-care, and the development of individual approaches to address personal, academic, or work-related stress. Their self-care experiences have contributed an extension to the meaning of self-care and further differentiated it as a process which is multi-faceted and composed of several layers.

The super-ordinate theme of Self-Care: A Composition of Layers can best be understood by considering the following sub-themes: *Recognizing Vulnerability, Prioritizing Self, Paradigm Shift,* and *Laying the Foundation.*

Recognizing Vulnerability. The layer of recognizing vulnerability can be conceptualized as an awareness of the point at which a factor, or a set of factors puts a person at risk of disruption in their optimal functioning. During conversations with participants regarding self-care, their experiences included discussing the complexity and demanding nature of their roles as graduate students. Their accounts included personal stressors - balancing multiple roles, family obligations, feelings of inadequacy - as well as work-related stressors - navigating client's traumatic experiences - which put them under pressure, ultimately reaching a point in time where they knew something had to change.

Hazel stressed the importance of "recognizing that my levels of stress were increasing in response to ongoing challenges" and interfering with "my day-to-day functioning." She described finding it difficult to balance graduate school and family life and keep up with all the demands. She commented, "It was a very stressful time, the whole balancing school, work, life, husband, and child, and it left me feeling vulnerable." She stated that one of the hardest stressors to deal with was overcoming feelings of inadequacy, which she termed "the imposter syndrome:"

> I had a huge sense of the imposter syndrome going through grad school. The feeling of not being good enough to do this. Especially working on my thesis or working with clients and thinking of how I am going to do this when I'm not smart enough and trying to overcome those feelings of not doing things right.

Hazel spoke passionately about the importance of recognizing the challenges and stressors that were affecting her personally and professionally and finding ways to take adequate ongoing care of herself "in order to move forward."

Aaron expanded on the idea of vulnerability, sharing a story about working with a client whose traumatic personal stories he found "challenging:"

> When I was working in a counselling role there was a student who shared that he went on a four-day methamphetamine bender because his dad gave him some. You hear these stories and in your head you're just like, 'what the hell! What do I do with this?' Its stressful to deal with that kind of stuff and figure out how to process it.

For Aaron, it was encounters with these types of stressful situations that created a sense of vulnerability for him, but also brought an increased awareness of "needing to take time" to navigate and "process some of this stuff" to maintain his personal and professional self.

Janice also identified feeling vulnerable to stress during graduate school due to the accumulating pressures of balancing her role as a student and parent, and having something constantly hanging over her:

It was stressful because my kids were used to me being home for everything that they needed me for. They were used to meals being ready, lunches made, and everything being done. And when I started doing classes I would have to spend time at the library studying and writing papers and they would be upset with me. There were times where I would come home and drop my stuff, and everyone was on me. I just felt like I couldn't function.

Janice described how it always seemed like there is "everything in the kitchen sink." When asked what she meant by this she explained that it was this state of mind of not being able to relax because of "all the things I need to do." While Janice found these experiences to be "difficult and tiring," recognizing her own vulnerabilities helped her emerge with a better sense of the importance of caring for herself.

All the participants acknowledged that at times, being a graduate student in applied psychology has been difficult for them, often exacerbating symptoms of stress. However, once participants recognized their own vulnerabilities, it initiated a move to examine how they might address stress to function more effectively. A common next layer in their self-care experiences was to shift their focus inward, acknowledging and attending to personal needs.

Prioritizing Self. A second layer of self-care that emerged from participants' experiences was the acknowledgement of personal needs and the importance of consciously choosing to make themselves a priority to address personal, academic, or work-related stress. William spoke to the importance and value of this part of his self-care. For William "an

important step" was turning inward, "hearing" his needs and understanding the "validity of those needs." This self-awareness set the foundation for William fulfilling what he described as a "necessary part of me going forward so I can operate at my best level." William was passionate when talking about the importance of prioritizing and carving out time to address his needs. His words identified a correlation between knowing that it is beneficial for him, but also to those around him:

> There's an understanding that if I don't take the time to maintain myself, I am not doing myself or anybody else any favors. I have this idea that it's something I need to do in order to put my best self forward. I am just a human being and I need these things to do my best work, just like anybody else. I justify these decisions by thinking in terms of what would be in my best interest and the most help for myself and the others around me.

The recognition of how imperative it was that he takes opportunities to give himself a physical and psychological boost was evident in William's narrative:

> There are occasions where I'll take time to rejuvenate myself and I feel like there's a boost to my self-efficacy. I feel scrappy. I feel like I am fit, and I can roll with the punches. There is a sense of self-confidence, which I don't always have, and I'm capable of dealing with life's challenges. I am sort of riding that wave of having things balanced.

> Wendy experienced a battle juggling the demands of being both a student and a wife while in graduate school and giving precedence to her own needs. She shared the difficulties of not having a consistent support system to help her:

The biggest stress about being married as a graduate student is not having a partner that understands the stress of being in a master's program. When I am stressed and don't have time to do things at home, my husband doesn't understand that he needs to pick up the slack. So, I am often faced with the challenges of doing everything. Once I feel stressed, I know I need to take the time to do something to help myself relax or take time for myself, but it is hard.

My interpretation of what Wendy was suggesting is that she does not always have time to care for her own needs and questioning whether it is okay for her to say no to all her other responsibilities in order to prioritize herself. The conversation stimulated Wendy's thinking and she described the importance of challenging her perspectives and priorities to "create space" for focusing on her own health and well-being:

Some days are easier than others for me to figure out that I need to do this. However, I know I must get better at giving myself time to relax, de-stress, and just be alone. When I take care of myself, I recognize it helps to mitigate my stress and then everything else falls into place.

Janice also noted the importance of paying attention to her own needs as an integral layer of her self-care experience. As part of her professional training, Janice completed a counselling practicum where she saw many clients a day. She described the significance of prioritizing herself as part of addressing professional stressors arising from the nature of her work:

I loved seeing clients, but after facing five clients in the day I found, coming back home, that I would walk in the door and go straight to my bedroom. I would put on my sweatpants and take thirty minutes to myself before I even interacted with my

family or started making supper. I really needed the quiet transition time to process

things as a way of promoting wellness for myself and being available for others.

This self-awareness was an important aspect of Janice being a competent and effective

counsellor, but also a compassionate and devoted mother.

It was evident in participant narratives that one of the more prominent reasons for an

increase in their stress was when they failed to stop and check in with themselves to identify

sources of stress in their lives and make time to address their needs. However, when

participants did appraise and prioritize their wants and needs, they sounded more alive to the

world around them, more available, and more capable of giving their fullest selves.

Paradigm Shift. A paradigm shift can be thought of as an important change that

happens when the usual way of thinking about something is replaced by a new or different

way of understanding. This layer identifies and articulates a convergence among participant

narratives that once they had awareness of their vulnerability to stress and made a conscious

choice to make themselves, their personal needs, a priority, a common theme in their self-

care experience included a fundamental shift in the way they understood and approached the

concept of self-care. It was clear during the analysis that four of the participants started with

a concept of self-care as something we do for ourselves and then tick it off the to do list. The

four participants described entering their graduate programs with the belief that taking care

of oneself meant eating a bag of chips, watching Netflix, or having a bubble bath – taking a

half hour or so to laze about in the tub with candles. William shared that "I think what self-

care means to me has shifted. I think when I first heard the term, for me it was very

synonymous with how you treat yourself; you know bubble baths and stuff." When reflecting

on his individual self-care experiences, part of the process involved William establishing a

new interpretation of what self-care meant to him. He further defined this shift in how he viewed self-care, describing it as a form of self-maintenance:

> Self-care nurtures the self and allows you to operate at your best level. For me, incorporating something physical into my schedule as a form of self-care helps me to cope with stress. It gives me the ability to sit with stressful feelings in a way that makes them more tolerable and comfortable. Then I can figure out where they are coming from and address them.

> Expanding on William's idea of nurturing the self, Hazel spoke of the significant role the philosophy of the aboriginal medicine wheel now plays in how she understands and approaches self-care. She stressed how important it has become to attend to all parts of the self – physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual – for maintaining her health and well-being:

> In taking care of yourself when things get stressful, for me it's not just your physical, mental, or emotional self. You also have your spiritual self too. It has become important to make sure you are attending to the alignment and interconnectivity of all aspects of self on a continual basis.

Janice, on the other hand, described her paradigm shift as the development of a more positive mindset:

> Up until recently, to me self-care meant having a bubble bath, but it's not those kinds of concrete things. I think for me now, it's more about developing a mindset, almost like not beating myself up constantly and lingering on the negative, but instead trying to stay more positive and being more positive about myself.

To accomplish this, Janice would be doing things like taking time for herself in nature, because she feels exhilarated when doing that. For Janice, nature is where she finds her spirituality. It is her "religion."

Four participants identified how this shift in understanding and approaching self-care was a key layer of their self-care experiences. For them, self-care became a conscious and deliberate practice that meant more than just taking a bubble bath. It had evolved into a constant work-in-progress, embodied by a shift in behaviours, mindsets, and attitudes.

Laying the Foundation. As this layer emerged from the data analysis, many phrases came to mind to characterize the experiences participants were describing; taking action, putting into practice, and bringing to fruition were a few. The participants' conscious choice to lay the foundation for managing stress and establishing wellness seemed to appropriately capture a common element of their experiences. All participants in the study spoke about this layer as a plan based on individuality, life circumstances, and their unique individual needs to maintain health and wellness. Their narratives highlighted a process where they began developing an understanding of how to best address personal and professional stress through self-care and adopting a space to experiment with a full range of approaches in several different domains to ensure they were caring for their mind, body, and spirit.

The foundation for each plan was built from of a variety of approaches deliberately engaged in to address personal, academic, or work-related stress and promote physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Wendy described the importance of laying a foundation for self-care to manage what she calls the "emotional rollercoaster" of graduate school. She shared how important it was for her to try connecting with friends and family as way to meet her needs. "I gravitate to the relational self-care piece. Although it can be a

struggle, I try to make time to be with friends and family to help myself de-stress." However, Wendy also discussed her struggles in addressing self-care in a more holistic way:

> When it comes to physical self-care, it's hard to incorporate the practical steps. I want to exercise, I want to eat right, and I want to sleep, but that is put on the backburner when I'm stressed. I don't give myself the time for physical self-care.

> For Aaron, the relational self-care piece was also an empowering way to address the

personal and academic stress in his life. Surrounding himself with supportive people was the foundation for being able to "to relax and decompress:"

> Managing to find time in a busy schedule to meet with friends or family, to walk outside or go to a movie, is difficult, but it is a commitment that is necessary to invest in for my long-term personal health and well-being.

However, Aaron also described how his self-care foundation has started to crumble and investing in himself had "become a huge challenge:"

> All the things that have happened this last year during graduate school have made it exceptionally difficult to prioritize or maintain self-care. I found out I have some health problems on top of a plethora of other health troubles. I have also had some personal struggles related to family. I know being proactive and connecting with my social network is necessary, so I am ready for what the next day brings. But, to be truthful, my social life has gone in the toilet the last little while.

> Hazel indicated that she would often find herself wrestling with balancing school, life

responsibilities, and the stress of work, but strived to incorporate elements of spiritual and emotional care as foundational pieces of her self-care plan. She shared, "some days are harder than others, and I have to remind myself that self-care is a priority and to take action

to look after myself." However, she described a motivation to engage in a variety of self-care approaches because it was important for her and her family:

> When I get stressed, I like to use energy work and Reiki, more of that energy spiritual side. I also like to meditate to deal with stress. If I have time, I will seek out counselling support. No matter what, I don't have to rush, and I can do something for even one minute, like dry brushing my body off and leaving the negative energy behind. It is important for my family, for my child, for my husband, and for me to commit to self-care.

William described how his personal belief system created the foundation for his decision making regarding self-care. His language characterized how important it was that he incorporated time in his schedule for physical self-care because it served to boost his energy, increase his awareness, and improve his mood.

> For me, running is just a really good way of staying on an even keel and given that it can be so powerful and have such an intense impact on what I think of myself and how I relate to others. It is necessary to help me maintain balance and be aware of where my head and emotions are at.

Throughout the interviews with participants, it became clear that they valued the importance of prioritizing and maintaining self-care, as they all endeavored to incorporate a plan that met their personal needs. The sub-theme presented here illustrates participants' self-care plans as a foundation upon which they can continually build to manage personal, academic, or work-related stress. However, all the participants acknowledged they experienced challenges and obstacles that fragmented this foundation, creating difficulties in

prioritizing and maintaining self-care on an ongoing basis. These challenges and obstacles are presented next.

Self-Care Challenges: Obstacles to Prioritizing and Maintaining Self-Care

According to the Oxford Dictionary, obstacle is defined as "a situation [or] event that makes it difficult for you to do or achieve something" (Oxford University Press, 2017, para. 1). Picking up on language used by Hazel, "obstacles" is used to describe and envision the challenges experienced by participants in prioritizing and maintaining self-care. When I asked Hazel for clarification about obstacles in relation to self-care, she described several academic and family challenges that required much of her "time, effort, and attention." During various times throughout graduate school, these obstacles impacted her effectiveness in addressing "personal needs" through self-care.

Throughout my interviews with participants I was curious about what obstacles, if any, they experienced and how that impacted their ability to prioritize and maintain self-care during graduate school. Consequently, one of my guiding questions was "What specific barriers are there to engaging in self-care?" Regardless of the direct question posed to the participants, it was clear that there were different aspects of their self-care experiences that involved encountering obstacles along the way.

How and to what extent these obstacles impacted participants' abilities to prioritize and maintain self-care was a key layer that emerged during the analysis. This super-ordinate theme focuses on those obstacles and can be further understood through the sub-themes of *Time Poverty* and *Guilt*. The next section will describe how the participants gave meaning to these experiences and how they coexist with encompassing beliefs and perspectives that self-care practices are an integral part of helping the students manage stress.

Time Poverty. When I asked the participants in the current study what stood between themselves and the prioritization and maintenance of self-care, their accounts conveyed a collective of obstacles; this sub-theme focuses on one of those obstacles. Specifically, participants mentioned the pressures of balancing school related priorities, personal demands, and self-care needs, which resulted in time restraints, or, what I have interpreted as time poverty. One of the obstacles participants faced in their self-care experiences was finding time amongst all their other demands to engage in self-care activities regularly and effectively. Participants described personal struggles between knowing self-care was necessary for their well-being, and the significant challenge of not having enough time in their schedules to meet all the expectations placed upon them and commit to self-care.

During the interview with Janice, she noted that a significant part of her self-care experiences was the challenge of finding "a school-life balance." She described how recognizing the importance of self-care is one thing, "executing it is another". Her words captured the frustration of trying to do everything that was required - school work, thesis, and family obligations - while finding time for her own needs. She spoke about the crux of balancing the family schedule, her kids' needs, academic responsibilities, and engaging in ongoing self-care:

> Trying to schedule everything in, or saying 'no,' to kids because I need to do something else is what I find hard. My kids are very spirited, and they like to give their opinions about things, so it doesn't always go over well if they need something and I take time for myself instead.

Janice's words clearly communicated that she wrestles with trying to balance the needs of others and the realization that she needs to take time to invest in herself.

Wendy also highlighted the pressures of finding balance with limited time resources as the biggest hurdle to prioritizing and maintaining self-care. When asked to describe specific aspects of her experience, she responded:

> For me, I think juggling life, school, and work is one of the biggest barriers to engaging in ongoing self-care. With me working, being on my own a lot of the time, having to deal with all the personal struggles that are going on in my life, on top of school, some days it is difficult to find opportunities to invest in myself.

Wendy indicated that she has wrestled with trying to do too many things at once and "burning the candle" at both ends, so maintaining a self-care plan can has seen its challenges. She characterized making a commitment to "attend to different domains" in her life to maintain well-being, but then getting "knocked sideways" when overwhelmed with multiple demands on her time. While she did not always feel successful in implementing and/or maintaining her efforts when demands piled up, she still viewed self-care as an important investment in her well-being.

Like Janice, Hazel also spoke about the challenge of finding time to balance family and school with time for herself. Not having enough time in her day to do what is required never mind what is needed was a key contributor that made maintaining self-care a challenge for Hazel:

> Lack of time is a big obstacle to my ongoing self-care. I often think maybe I'll exercise at some point today or do some meditation, but you're busy taking care of kids, making sure your household is in order, getting groceries, writing a thesis, and all that.

She passionately noted the challenge of understanding the importance of self-care and consequently the struggle to find time to incorporate it on a regular basis:

> There is so much emphasis on self-care and it's great that it is there, but it makes you feel like, at least for me, that's one more thing that I have to do. It's helpful and you need it, seeing what happens when I don't do it, versus seeing what happens when I do it. But sometimes, it's one more thing on your plate and how much can this plate hold.

For Hazel, it was clear that creating time to look after her own needs was an ever evolving and dynamic process.

As I reflected on participants' experiences, it became increasingly apparent that although each of them made efforts to prioritize themselves, engaging in self-care often fell behind other demands in their lives. As Hazel noted, "self-care ends up being the first thing to go when there are all these other things to do." Repeatedly putting other needs ahead of their own often lead to a lack of "me time" for participants, which in turn magnified stress and prevented them from being their best selves.

Although participants found self-care to be useful in navigating the stress of graduate school, they did not always feel successful in meeting their personal self-care needs due to time poverty. Participants were not only faced with countless demands and tasks that consistently pulled them in numerous directions, their narratives also highlighted the evolving nature of being forced to make decisions regarding which need to attend to first. The participants who were parents spoke about this unique aspect of their self-care experiences which entailed having to decide between looking after children, making dinners, taking care of everyone else, working on their thesis, or taking time to attend to their own

well-being. One parent alluded to the challenge of trying to maintain the basic "day-to-day" and keep "all the balls in the air" as a really demanding endeavor, and it left little time for her to be able to have fun, relax, rest, and have downtime.

For participants, it was a challenge to find time to navigate daily demands effectively and to also look beyond them to attend to the more important task of addressing personal and professional well-being through self-care. However, all participants alluded to sustainable self-care as a continuous learning journey, not as a specific daily target that must be achieved.

Guilt. Sometimes self-care may be viewed as an indulgence. Making time for oneself often means stepping away from other roles and responsibilities in our lives; working on an assignment, studying, raising a family, or looking after family members. A common thread woven in and among participants' experiences is one which depicted underlying themes of guilt when choosing one need over another. At times during the interviews and analysis, it was difficult to navigate this theme, as it served as a type of remembrance of my own uncomfortable feelings of guilt when practicing self-care. However, this recognition further emphasized the gift that self-care is to graduate students in applied psychology and characterized a sense of hope and determination that change happens when one embraces the uncomfortable and difficult times.

During the interview with Hazel, she described her struggle with guilt and questioned whether it was okay to take time for her own health and wellness when there are other pressing matters:

When I reflect on my self-care experience, the second challenge I think about is guilt.

I battled knowing that I was working on something important and making progress,

but also knowing that I needed to focus more on my own self-care.

The dilemma for Hazel was trying to figure out how to navigate this difficult decision-making process and figure out which need was the most important at the time. She shared that "it was not uncommon for me to have feelings of guilt during these times." As we spoke more about her feelings of guilt, I asked Hazel if she could remember instances when she really struggled with these emotions. In response to the question she replied:

I remember having all these things that I needed to balance, like should I go for a

walk, but if I go for a walk, well that is half an hour that I'm not reading a chapter,

doing research, or writing my thesis, or that's half an hour that I'm not spending with

my family.

I interpreted this as Hazel's "guilt walk," as she really struggled internally to decide which need to prioritize, and then having feelings of guilt when choosing the walk over all the other things she needed to accomplish.

Aaron was also able to access some memories of guilt associated with self-care. He described his experiences as something like a merry-go-round, going around and around in circles:

I feel guilty for not engaging in self-care especially when I love doing it. There are

times when I think I really want to do something for myself, but then thinking I am

too tired, or I should be doing schoolwork. Then it just becomes a vicious circle. I

feel guilty, and the guilt makes you feel tired and around you go.

Aaron proclaimed that it ultimately gets to the point where he must choose which need to address, and then try to be happy and comfortable with that decision. As we continued our conversation around guilt, Aaron spoke about sacrificing self-care and the things he enjoys so that he can finally be "free" of all his graduate school responsibilities. I felt that last part of his statement "be free" was a poignant commentary on the internal struggle to find balance, and in the end putting self-care and wellness on hold or abandoning it all together, which exacerbated his feelings of guilt.

Janice also provided insight into the challenges of making ongoing self-care a priority and associated feelings of guilt. During the interview, she described how she wrestles with trying to balance the belief that the needs of others come first and the reality that she needs to take care of herself first. She described a subconscious mentality from her youth that suggested women are here to serve, so making oneself a priority is frowned upon:

> I think about enjoying the things I want to do and then all the things I should be doing and feeling guilty about it. I think for me, that's been something to work through. And that is probably true for a lot of women. That's what you work through because we are kind of raised that way. Or, at least I was. You should be doing stuff, but you shouldn't be doing stuff for yourself.

Janice questioned the origin of this belief, suggesting it is a societal expectation of the role of women. This was an interesting observation, offering insight into how women have been socialized to put others' needs before their own in order to maintain relationships and be good caregivers, which leaves them susceptible to feelings of guilt when they try to meet their own self-care needs.

In the face of these difficult feelings, it became apparent during the interviews that once participants reflected on their own feelings of guilt, there was a realization that self-care is a journey, not a destination, and part of that journey is deserving to be healthy and happy like everyone else. Participants shared that it was important to keep working to quiet that nagging voice in one's head and keep perspective on what really matters.

Summary

The experiences of five graduate students in applied psychology has been interpreted and described in this chapter. The data were collected through interviews and analyzed using IPA. Although I cannot completely understand or represent the experiences of the participants, I endeavored to represent my interpretations of their experiences and express their voices to the best of my ability. This is the purpose of IPA, not to completely experience the inside perspective of the participant, but instead to engage in a parallel interpretive process by deciphering how the participants are interpreting their own experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

Through this process of interpretative analysis two super-ordinate themes emerged: *Self-Care: A Composition of Layers*, and *Self-Care Challenges: Obstacles to Prioritizing and Maintaining Self-Care*. The two super-ordinate themes contained six sub-themes: *Recognizing Vulnerability*, *Prioritizing Self*, *Paradigm Shift*, *Laying the Foundation, Time Poverty, and Guilt.* The themes that emerged from interviews with the five participants from the current study provided a valuable perspective on the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. Their particular words captured in verbatim quotes are poignant and meaningful. Participants'

accounts highlighted their self-care experiences as a multi-faceted and dynamic process

comprised of several layers and illuminated the interconnectedness between the layers.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to examine the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. These findings are based on the interview accounts of five participants enrolled in an applied psychology graduate program, a period of professional training when navigating the transition into graduate school, adjusting to and balancing personal and professional roles simultaneously, carrying heavy workloads, dealing with challenging research projects, maintaining family relationships and responsibilities, and experiencing time poverty, all create an inordinate amount of stress.

While the participants from the M. Ed School and Counselling Psychology program face many of the same challenges as graduate students in non-professional training programs, they are also unique in several ways. They are enrolled in a two-year full-time thesis program that integrates research and practice and is unique across Canada in providing training in both school psychology and counselling psychology. The students complete a program with a relatively high number of credit units, and they are required to finish an 8-month professional practicum, where they are exposed to clients' traumatic narratives. Participants recalled the challenges inherent in being pulled in numerous directions and being forced to make decisions regarding which demands to attend to first.

Participants' accounts underscored the adversities of students trying to juggle personal and professional life while in graduate school, provided insight into the integral role of self-care in the quest to achieve balance and well-being, and presented rich descriptions of the layers and challenges of their self-care journeys. Here, the findings of the current study are reviewed and discussed in relation to current theory and literature. Following this is a

discussion of the strengths, limitations and delimitations of the study, considerations for future research, and considerations for practice and training. The chapter concludes with a reflection of the research process and final thoughts.

Self-Care: A Composition of Layers

Participants from the current study, who are preparing to enter the field of applied psychology, shared their experiences with a multitude of stressors that created challenges for them during their time as graduate students. These included academic responsibilities, poor work-school-life balance, finances/debt, parenting, and finding the time to incorporate and maintain self-care. This supports Carter & Barnett's (2014) and El-Ghoroury et al.'s (2012) findings that described the pressures inherent in the lives of graduate students, as they are pulled in numerous directions, being forced to make decisions regarding which demand to attend to first, and the accompanying challenge of incorporating self-care.

As mentioned in Chapter One, the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing stress and maintaining wellness is an understudied phenomenon. I had anticipated that the participants would speak to their self-care approaches and the challenges they faced in prioritizing and maintaining self-care. However, the participants' self-care experiences emerging as a theme incorporating a composition of layers (recognizing vulnerability, prioritizing self, paradigm shift, and laying the foundation) was surprising, revealing a rich description of their experiences and unveiling the layers which have structured their self-care journeys.

The current study described the self-care experiences of participants using four constituent themes: *Recognizing Vulnerability; Prioritizing Self; Paradigm Shift; and Laying*

the Foundation – each of these are an important contribution to existing literature and will be discussed in turn.

        Recognizing Vulnerability. Throughout the interviews, participants communicated several stressors that arose from different aspects of their day to day lives and how these impacted their health and well-being. A common theme woven in and among participants' experiences was the importance of developing self-awareness into their own vulnerabilities and acting to address or remedy them. Hazel, Janice, and Aaron all described a recognition of their own vulnerabilities to stress, emphasized the importance of this recognition, and articulated their undertakings to manage stress. This identifier of recognizing one's own vulnerability is consistent with and well documented in the self-care literature (Carter & Barnett, 2014; Maranzan et al., 2018; Pearlman, 1995). Pearlman (1995) described how acting to strengthen oneself and protecting oneself from the effects of stress is contingent on remaining connected to the physical and emotional self. Similarly, Carter and Burnett (2014) highlighted the importance of graduate students in applied psychology understanding their own stress and recognizing personal vulnerabilities, noting how exploring the causes of stress and its implications is not only necessary for effective self-care, but also a key component or layer to healthfully managing it throughout graduate school.

        The skillfulness of participants in perceiving and processing their emotional, physical, and behavioral responses to stress was the first step toward managing it. This supports Carter and Barnett's (2014) findings that documented the significance of graduate students making a conscious effort to regularly reflect on and process the many potential personal and professional sources of stress in order to respond to them in a proactive and effective manner.

Participants in the current study described how they experienced a wide variety of emotions when embarking upon this journey of self-reflection. This is perhaps not surprising considering "emotions are absolutely central to our understanding of experience," (Smith et al., 2009, p. 199) particularly within the field of mental health. Hazel described how her graduate school experience was a very "stressful" time, trying to balance all the demands and trying to overcome feelings of "inadequacy" or not being "good enough." Recognizing that these challenges were affecting her personally and professionally was a significant layer of Hazel's self-care experience, helping her move forward in addressing personal and professional well-being.

The emphasis on the importance of self-reflection, acknowledging one's feelings, thoughts, and needs is consistent with and well documented in the self-care literature (Baker, 2003: Richards et al., 2010). To manage stress and promote well-being, Richards et al. (2010) described the importance of examining one's own internal thoughts and feelings and reflecting on what these mean to each individual. Personal awareness and understanding were something participants considered as a core layer of their evolving self-care experiences, as it encouraged personal commitment and motivation towards prioritizing self and working towards physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness.

Prioritizing Self. Participants in current study shared the importance of prioritizing self as an essential layer of their self-care experience. Doing so provided them an opportunity to invest in themselves and promote ongoing wellness. During the interview with William, he described how prioritizing his own needs was necessary to be able to deal with stress and "put his best self forward." Similarly, Janice clearly described how prioritizing her needs was an opportunity to be alone to "process things" and come out feeling "physically" and

"emotionally" sound. This is consistent with the current research on self-care that notes (a) nurturing oneself first, builds resilience so we can better cope with challenges; and (b) is essential for both personal and professional well-being (Carter & Barnett, 2014, Skovholt, 2016). Further, the research shows that maintaining a certain regard for the self, doing things one wants to do, and engaging in self-care activities are fundamental for the promotion of psychological wellness and effective functioning (Skovholt, 2016).

All the participants in the study noted how imperative it was to take opportunities for the self to boost physical and psychological well-being, which is consistent with the literature on self-care (Carter & Barnett, 2014; Skovholt, 2016). William characterized this well when he said, "There are occasions where I'll take the time to rejuvenate myself, and I feel like… I can roll with the punches… I'm capable of dealing with [life's] challenges." A similar experience was also shared by Janice when she described how prioritizing the self is a way of "recharging my batteries" so she can take on life's challenges and be "available for others." Hazel noted that when she made herself a priority, it helped to bring a "calmness" to her life. However, Hazel also described times where she would neglect her own needs and end up feeling "depleted." This has relevance and significance because in current literature on self-care, it has been noted that when graduate students in applied psychology put their own needs and well-being on hold, or overlook them entirely, it often results in harmful consequences for themselves and therefore, perhaps, for their clients (Carter and Barnett, 2014; Forrest et al., 1999; Shen-Miller et al., 2011).

The results of the current study corroborate those of other investigations in underscoring the important role prioritizing self has in ensuring personal and professional vitality (Pearlman, 1995; Turner et al., 2005). Pearlman (1995) stated that taking time for self

can positively affect mood, increase general wellness, and decrease the overall likelihood of emotional exhaustion and impairment. Failure to prioritize self may lead to both personal and professional ramifications (Peluso et al., 2011).

Paradigm Shift. Self-care is a concept that has received varying amounts of attention in the literature (Baker, 2003; Coster & Schwebel, 1997; Dattilio, 2015; Guy & Norcross, 2007; Norcross, 2000; Porter, 1995; Schwebel & Coster, 1998). Due to the absence of a consistent definition for the term self-care, debate has occurred over the last 30 to 40 years, which has resulted in the evolution of the concept of self-care. Self-care has been understood as a way of taking action to preserve or improve one's own health (Kramen-Khan & Hansen, 1998; Mahoney, 1997) or as a means of shifting the focus beyond the awareness of stress to enhancing physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health (Coster & Schwebel, 1997; Porter, 1995).

A common theme or layer that emerged from the self-care experiences of participants included a personal and unique understanding of what self-care meant to them, including a fundamental shift in the way they viewed and approached the concept of self-care. This is perhaps not surprising considering Skovholt's (2016) suggestion that there are many understandings and methods of personal renewal. Further, according to Carter and Barnett (2014) the concept of self-care is a continuously evolving process that shifts and changes over time. During the interviews, four participants spoke about a shift in how they understood self-care. William and Janice described how they started out viewing the pinnacle of self-care as "spa days," resting and "relaxing at home in a bubble bath," or watching "Netflix," and how they now conceptualized it in another, more profound way. They noted that while "Netflix" and "bubble baths" are all wonderful things that no doubt promote an

aspect of relaxation and may alleviate some stress, for them the essence of self-care shifted to the promotion of healthy stress management behaviors, attitudes, and mindsets to enhance physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health and quality of life. These findings are consistent with research on self-care that demonstrates within every individual, there are several different dimensions that can be attended to within a self-care plan (Carter & Barnett, 2014; Skovholt, 2016). For the participants, redefining self-care meant moving away from a checklist to be completed, to placing considerable emphasis on the importance of a holistic wellness approach involving knowledge, skills, confidence, and motivation. This is congruent with other research that highlights self-care in terms of a continuous, proactive engagement in the dimensions of wellness that promote physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being (Clark et al., 2009; Maranzan et al., 2018; Myers et al., 2012).

The paradigm shift in how participants viewed self-care supports the assertion that "treating yourself," "taking a break," and "enjoying the moment" is a wonderful way to improve mood, but true self-care needs to revolve around the promotion of ongoing commitment to a holistic appreciation of what it means to be well. Although it includes striving for health, fueling the body, engaging the mind, and nurturing the spirit, Ardell (2005) suggests it's also about adopting a lifestyle and a personalized approach to living life in a way that allows you to become the best kind of person that your potentials, circumstances, and fate will allow. While attention must be given to physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, as neglect of any one over time may adversely affect the others, and ultimately one's own health, well-being, and quality of life, they do not need to be equally balanced. "The 8 Dimensions of Wellness" (2016) affirms participant experiences

that the aim should be to strive for a personal harmony that feels most authentic to each individual, including one's own views of what it means to live life fully.

    Laying the Foundation. Self-care has been identified as one potential method for alleviating or minimizing stress (Barnett & Cooper, 2009). Coster and Schwebel (1997) argue that self-care among professionals in the field of applied psychology is a means for shifting the focus beyond the awareness of stress to the promotion of a healthy, well-rounded lifestyle. This argument also extends to the experiences of the participants in the current study who described the value of self-care in addressing their own stressful challenges in order to maintain well-being. An essential layer that emerged from participants' self-care experiences was the importance of laying the foundation for a course of action to promote personal wellness.

    It has been highlighted throughout the literature that every individual has unique sources of stress that results in specific self-care needs (Ardell, 2005; Carter & Barnett, 2014; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). This supports the current research findings of participants adopting several foundational self-care approaches they considered important to addressing stress and maintaining well-being. Aaron and Wendy shared the experience of seeking social support from friends and family to decompress and destress. This is consistent with Clark et al.'s (2009) findings, that having strong social supports as part of a self-care plan was related to lower stress levels and improved well-being.

    Due to its ability to provide a physical and psychological boost, William described his preference for engaging in physical exercise to combat the effects of stress. William indicated that running was the one self-care approach that he continually relied on to buffer the effects of stress and improve well-being during his time in graduate school. The notion

that regular exercise and physical activity can enhance well-being is supported in other research that linked exercise to a reduction in stress among college students (Brown, 1991; Frank, Tong, Lovelo, Carrera, & Dupperly, 2008; McIntosh, Bhandari, & Holcomb, 2007). However, Myers et al. (2012) suggest exercise, especially in the face of academic pressures, may increase stress for some students.

Hazel described how the practice of meditation was an effective self-care approach for lowering her stress levels and improving her well-being during graduate school. This supports Skovholt's (2016) findings that the practice of relaxation-stress reduction approaches like meditation are effective strategies to reduce physical body response and arousal to stress. Hazel noted that meditation is accessible to everyone, can be tailored to a variety of time constraints, and has the power to transform one's relationship to themselves, to others, and the world around them. These were the driving forces surrounding the introduction of meditation into Hazel's self-care plan. The diverse self-care approaches described by participants have been highlighted throughout the self-care literature, which suggests that every individual has unique sources of stress that results in specific self-care needs (Ardell, 2005; Carter & Barnett, 2014; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012).

Overall, participants' accounts corresponded with the literature on self-care which suggested support from family and friends, exercise, relaxation, and meditation are important ways to promote well-being (Clark et al., 2009; Coster & Schwebel, 1997; Mahoney, 1997; Turner et al., 2005). The findings of the current study that self-care played an important role for participants in managing stress and promoting wellness is supported by the research of Skovholt (2016) who described self-care as being impactful in addressing stress, improving day to day functioning, and promoting well-being.

Self-Care Challenges: Obstacles to Prioritizing and Maintaining Self-Care

The challenge of prioritizing and maintaining self-care is not a new concept. Current literature acknowledges that recognizing the importance of and need for self-care is one thing, executing it is another (Baker, 2003; Carter & Barnett, 2014). Research suggests that whilst applied psychologists often promote the use of self-care practices in their work with clients, they struggle to efficiently prioritize and maintain such practices in their own lives (Carter & Barnett, 2014; Wise, Hersh, & Gibson, 2012). The commonality of this difficulty was a prevalent underlying theme experienced by participants in the current study; and, these experiences created obstacles to the prioritization and maintenance of self-care. This section can be further understood through the following sub-themes: *Time Poverty*, and *Guilt*.

Time Poverty. Time poverty can be conceptualized as not having enough time for daily committed activities - employment, marriage, raising children, and necessary activities - self-care for restorative purposes and investment in one's health (Kalenkoski & Hamrick, 2013). The participants in the current study described experiences of time poverty; facing the challenge of having too much to do and too little time to do it, which created obstacles to prioritizing and maintaining self-care. This finding is supported by El-Ghoroury et al. (2012), who identified that one of the greatest challenges graduate students in applied psychology face is not having enough time in the day to do everything that is required of them. All five participants were often working to juggle multiple responsibilities and countless demands and tasks. While the participants from the M. Ed School and Counselling Psychology stream faced many of the same demands on their time as students in other graduate programs, they were also some unique challenges they faced. They were enrolled in a two-year full-time thesis program that integrated research and practice and is unique across Canada in providing

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training in both school psychology and counselling psychology. The students completed a program with a high number of credit units, and they finished an 8-month professional practicum, where they were exposed to the traumatic narratives of clients. Participants recalled the pressures inherent in being pulled in numerous directions and being forced to make decisions regarding which demands to attend to first. Wendy described how "juggling life, school, and work is one of the biggest barriers to engaging in ongoing self-care," and some days "it is difficult to find opportunities to invest in myself." This supports the findings of Carter and Barnett (2014) and Skovholt (2016) who stated that finding time to engage in self-renewal can be difficult (Carter & Barnett, 2014; Skovholt, 2016). Participants' accounts suggested that graduate students in applied psychology often feel the pressure to skip self-care opportunities to attend to other pressing obligations, and therefore continue to struggle to maintain and prioritize self-care.

Carter and Barnett (2014) argued that scarce time can be a significant challenge to accomplishing one's goals, including self-care and wellness. The findings of the current study are similar; for example, Janice and Hazel noted the conflict of knowing the importance of self-care and consequently struggling to find time to balance this with all the other demands in their lives. Williams-Nickelson (2003) suggested there are key elements to finding time to rebalance life in a more gratifying and sustainable way. She advocates for offloading personal or academic responsibilities and continuously seeking to reduce nonessential activities or habits that will free up time for self-care. Within this study it was apparent that several participants were experiencing dilemmas in practicing one or more of these key elements, which created frustration and stress. However, it was evident that these

challenges did not stop their drive but instead hindered it, meaning that they continued to seek ways to effectively manage time to work towards achieving self-care goals.

Guilt. It was acknowledged by all the participants in the current study that they contended with feelings of guilt when engaging in self-care. Although there was an awareness that self-care plays an important part in maintaining wellness, they struggled with taking time for themselves to promote well-being, often navigating feelings of guilt while "selfishly" trying to meet their own self-care needs. These findings support other research into self-care that suggested finding time to engage in self-renewal can be a difficult task, rife with negative feelings when taking time from other tasks to meet the needs of self (Skovholt, 2016). For those involved in the high touch professions – counsellors, therapists, students in training – Skovholt (2016) calls this the continual pull and the constant strain. The social role of giving of oneself is the constant requirement for success. Exhausted when saying yes, guilty when saying no – it is between giving and taking, between other care and self-care, and it becomes a universal dilemma. All the participants in the current study reported experiencing this dilemma. Hazel and Janice described the graduate school lifestyle as having the potential to become all-consuming and they often felt as though they must give 100% of themselves in everything they do, leading to feelings of guilt or failure when unable to meet the expectations they placed upon themselves.

It has been identified in the literature (Carter & Barnett, 2014) and discussed in this study, that the unrealistic belief that one can do it all, which means completing assignments, working with clients, writing a thesis, looking after family, in addition to taking time for self-care, was a struggle for the participants, which increased their feelings of guilt and exposure to stress (Carter & Barnett, 2014). Participants described the importance of shifting their

perspective of self-care from a practice perceived as selfish or an act of indulgence, to a process perceived as essential for the promotion of physical and psychological wellness and effective functioning (Carter & Barnett, 2014). Although difficult, participants stated that knowing self-care was an important first step in taking care of themselves, and a necessary part of one's personal and professional responsibilities, helped reduce feelings of guilt when they did attend to their needs.

Hazel and Janice, who were both students and mothers, described navigating feelings of guilt that would arise from balancing children, a spouse, school, and time for self. Janice asserted that women have been socialized to put others' needs before their own in order to maintain relationships and be good caregivers, making them susceptible to feelings of guilt. This is consistent with the literature on societal trends and the role of women. Traditionally women have been the primary caretakers of children and elders and have most often taken the lead in helping the family adjust to new realities and challenges. Now that many women combine work outside the home with that of family duties, there are increased concerns around women balancing multiples roles and the detrimental effects the combination of these roles can have, such as time squeeze, negative emotional spill-over, unrealistic expectations, and role-strain. Both the feminist literature and the mainstream social science literature point to the difficulties that women have in juggling multiple roles (Evans et al., 2016). The evidence indicates women who perform multiple concurrent roles often put the needs of others (i.e. spouse, family members, and employer) before their own and often end up feeling guilty when they try to address their own needs (Barnett, 2004, Sinha, 2017). The findings from this study support Barnett (2004) and Sinha's (2017) notion that women, especially

mothers, are often susceptible to feelings of guilt which has an impact on how they prioritize and maintain self-care.

It was important for participants in the current study to break free from the guilt that was lingering in their heads and hearts and give priority to their own needs. Carter and Barnett (2014) noted the benefits of taking time to reflect on how to reduce the "I musts" and "I shoulds," to maintain a degree of control over one's life and to effectively and realistically practice self-care (p. 131). This suggestion has even more relevance and pertinence, considering several of the participants felt they benefitted from contemplating their experiences with guilt as part of the interview process. Having this platform allowed them to develop awareness of the role guilt played within their self-care experiences, which had not been previously considered.

Strengths of the Study

This study had several strengths. First, it contributes to the literature and knowledge base on self-care, particularly among graduate students in applied psychology, who have been understudied and largely presented through a quantitative lens. The quantitative studies reviewed for this study were limited in contributing rich, in-depth detail of the phenomenon that qualitative studies can offer (Merriam, 2009). The current qualitative study asked participants specifically about their self-care experiences in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. What this study found, and contributes to the literature, is the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing stress are multi-faceted and composed of several layers, including recognizing vulnerability, understanding the importance of prioritizing the self, a shift in how they understood and approached self-care, and laying the foundation for addressing their individual self-care needs through a variety of

approaches. Their self-care experiences were impacted by challenges, including time poverty and guilt which were interpreted as obstacles to prioritizing and maintaining ongoing self-care. This took the existing research and developed it further; improving on it and taking it in a new direction.

A second strength of this study is the bulk of research to date has focused on the self-care strategies and recommendations for creating self-care practices. There are gaps in the literature relevant to students' perspectives and real experiences, which this research study addresses.

A third strength of the study is the specific methodological approach of Interpretative Phenomenological analysis (IPA) to frame the research question, theoretical perspectives, and analysis of data. The theory of phenomenology within IPA provides a theoretical perspective to examine an in-depth exploration of a lived experience to derive an essence of the experience (Smith et al., 2009). Through a phenomenological lens, I examined in detail the lived experience of a small sample of graduate students in an applied psychology program regarding their self-care experiences, and how those experiences were impacted by personal, academic, or work-related stress. Using the idiographic theoretical approach within IPA, I examined each case individually and found particular meaning for each individual (Smith et al., 2009). Last, using the hermeneutic theoretical approach within IPA, I examined the phenomenon within each individual, and then together as a whole to examine it between cases (Smith et. Al, 2009). Additionally, in using IPA, I attempted to understand the phenomenon from an "insider's perspective" (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p.53). From this perspective, the researcher attempts to understand the phenomenon by making meaning out of the participant's perspective (Smith et al., 2009).

A fourth strength of the study was the use of semi-structured interviews to engage in dialogue with participants regarding the phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility within the interview process, giving participants an opportunity to lead the discussion and share their experience, in their words, without the limitations of a strict interview schedule (Smith et al., 2009). Since the goal of IPA is to gain an insider's perspective, the flexible interview paved the way for the participants' experiential expertise to emerge (Smith et al., 2009). The interviews were guided by a set of questions; however, I deviated from the guide and followed the direction of the participants, modifying questions considering participants' responses and allowing flexibility to probe interesting and important areas.

A final strength of this research study was the process itself gave participants an opportunity to be seen and heard. The value of this cannot be underestimated in research with this population, as historically, there has been limited amounts of qualitative research aimed at understanding the in-depth experiences of graduate students regarding self-care and wellness. Existing research articles on self-care and wellness in applied psychology have been for the most part quantitative in nature and conducted primarily with mental health professionals already established in the field. By exploring the experiences through the lens of graduate students in applied psychology, it was possible to obtain multiple perspectives and offered "the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice" of self-care, because it "focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspective of those being studied" (Merriam, 2009, p. 1).

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

There are limitations of this study worthy of mention. First, even though using a semi-structured interview was a strength of the study, it could also be considered a limitation. Although interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant's experience and allow the interviewer to pursue in-depth information around a topic, there are some drawbacks. Interviews rely on participants sharing their experiences and as such are limited by what the interviewees choose to share at the time of the interviews. Participants may struggle to express what they are thinking and feeling, or there may be reasons why they do not wish to self-disclose. Further, qualitative interviews rely on respondents' abilities to recall significant detail about their thoughts, opinions, behaviors, experiences, and lives. It is possible in the current study that certain aspects of participants' experiences may have unconsciously, or otherwise been omitted, or they may not have remembered their experience clearly or accurately.

A second limitation may call into question the generalizability of the study; however, it is important to remember that this research is not designed to generalize to a large population. The current study is more focused on understanding individual experiences and developing a body of research that is useful and meaningful in the eyes of the participants, so the results help deepen understanding of their reality and develop understanding of the experience in existing research.

The current research study yielded three delimitations that describe how the study was narrowed in scope. The first delimitation is the study focused exclusively on graduate students from the School and Counselling Psychology program at the University of Saskatchewan. While graduate students in other applied psychology programs may have

similar experiences, the focus was limited to this population to create a fairly homogenous sample of participants for whom the research question would be meaningful, could provide insight and a particular perspective on the phenomenon under study, and to create an analysis with a detailed examination of the experiences of this particular group (Smith et al., 2009). This was done not to privilege the SCP students as the only group of participants that are interesting. Quite the contrary, by making the group as uniform as possible according to academic, theoretical, or social factors, I could then examine in detail the similarities and differences within this group of participants (Smith et al., 2009). This limits the transferability of findings to other individuals in graduate programs in applied psychology.

A second delimitation is the study covered only one post-graduate program in applied psychology located in the municipality of Saskatoon. The given locale was chosen due to the geographical location where the researcher resides. I did not consider interviewing participants residing in locations other than Saskatoon or attending programs in locations outside of Saskatoon. Therefore, the research results may not be applicable to graduate student populations residing in different locations.

A third delimitation was the interviews allowed only those who speak the same language as the interviewer, in this case English, to participate. The lack of non-English speaking participants is a significant gap in IPA literature because, as a UK based method, most research is conducted in English and published in English (Smith, 2004), limiting the availability to involve populations and participants whose first language is not English.

Considerations for Future Research

Research providing insights into self-care among professionals working in the field of applied psychology is a common topic in the literature. Additionally, research focusing on

the disruptive levels of stress – personal or work-related stress – among professionals working in the field is also common. Despite this, research examining the self-care experiences of graduate students who are training for professional careers in the field of applied psychology remains relatively limited. The current study added to the literature and knowledge base on self-care by examining the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. However, this study raised questions regarding how future research can be designed to continue developing knowledge around the phenomenon of self-care among this target population and provide a more comprehensive picture than currently exists.

Future research may consider examining the role of self-care among students in various stages of professional development. A longitudinal study examining the evolution of self-care among students from graduate school through to early career professional practice would be quite informative and would be a compelling contribution to current literature. Additionally, this type of longitudinal design could more fully examine the long-term effects of self-care in graduate school on outcomes in professional careers as well as the likelihood of continuing self-care after graduation.

Although a diverse sample was included in this study, future research aimed at exploring self-care among mothers and fathers who are graduate students in applied psychology would be valuable in providing further insight into these unique experiences. There appeared to be some divergence between the experiences of self-care among participants who had children and those who did not, as participants with children often referred to the ways that their children and families impacted their self-care experiences. The parents spoke about how looking after children day after day, making dinner, and taking care

of everyone else, combined with their academic roles as graduate students, often left them with the feeling of having no break in sight, and when they did take a break from family it would cause guilt and anxiety. One participant alluded to demanding endeavor of maintaining the basic "day-to-day" as a parent and student, trying to keep "all the balls in the air." These experiences left little time for her to be able to have fun, relax, rest, and have downtime.

Additionally, it would be beneficial to carry out further research on the role of gender and its impact on the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing stress. Existing literature suggests female graduate students experience greater stress over managing demands on their time and finding opportunities to invest in self-care (Cahir & Morris, 1991; Nelson, Dell'Oliver, Koch, & Buckler, 2001). Female participants in the current study felt they had less time for engaging in self-care due to commitments to their children/families. One participant in this study suggested this may be due to how women have been socialized to put others' needs before their own in order to maintain relationships and be good caregivers, which leaves them susceptible to feelings of guilt. Both the feminist literature and the mainstream social science literature point to the difficulties that women have in juggling multiple roles (Evans et al., 2016). The evidence indicates women who perform multiple concurrent roles often put the needs of others (i.e. spouse, family members, and employer) before their own (Barnett, 2004, Sinha, 2017). As such, it would be beneficial to carry out further research with mothers who are graduate students in applied psychology to determine if and/or how gender roles affect their self-care experiences.

Considerations for Practice and Training

The themes that emerged in the current study provide important insight into the experiences of self-care and wellness, however the graduate school environment presents challenges to prioritizing and maintaining self-care and wellness for students in applied psychology programs (Carter & Barnett, 2014). The findings from the current study provide a call to action for graduate students in applied psychology to actively integrate self-care into the very fiber of their professional identities now and during every phase of their professional careers to maintain personal and professional wellness. The CPA Ethics Code (2017) very clearly highlights self-care as an ethical imperative, stating that it is paramount for psychologists, trainees, and students to "engage in self-care activities that help to avoid conditions (e.g., burnout, addictions) that could result in impaired judgment and interfere with their ability to benefit and not harm others (CPA, 2017, p. 20). Further, psychologists, trainees, and students are mandated to take corrective action when such difficulties are present, such as to "seek appropriate help and/or discontinue scientific, teaching, supervision, or practice activity for an appropriate period of time, if a physical or psychological condition reduces their ability to benefit and not harm others (CPA, 2017, p. 20).

The findings from the current study may also be useful for training programs in applied psychology and supervisors who work with students during graduate school. The insights and themes that were described in this study provide awareness for departments and instructional staff, helping them strengthen their understanding of the challenges that students face and how this impacts their ability to prioritize and maintain self-care and wellness throughout graduate school. However, it should not be enough to recognize the difficulties students face when it comes to self-care and wellness. The fact that students manage these

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experiences does not negate a need for change. In keeping with the ethical imperative for self-care and wellness, each student must take responsibility for ensuring the development of a professional identity that includes an active focus on ongoing self-care. Conversely, responsibility for this also falls on the shoulders of training programs, departments, and supervisors. Departments may want to explore how they can refine their training programs in a way to offer the most comprehensive support possible for graduate students regarding stress, self-care, and wellness.

Undertaking evaluation studies on how to improve educational experiences for students, how to adequately provide information on self-care, and the accommodations necessary to create learning environments that foster well-being is recommended. Two resources are available that can guide this process. The first resource, Post-Secondary Student Mental Health: Guide to a Systemic Approach (2013) was created collaboratively between the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) and the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA). It outlines the fundamental aspects of a systemic approach and key components that can be used to inform University and department strategy development in fostering well-being. It provides a framework on how to support campus self-assessment, strategic goal setting, and the identification of options for change that can be used to inform planning and evaluation. While broad areas for strategy development are identified in the guide, it recognizes that each post-secondary institution has unique strengths, circumstances, and needs. Therefore, training programs, departments, and supervisors from graduate programs in applied psychology can develop strategies that consider their own unique contexts (CACUSS & CMHA, 2013).

A second resource, The Okanagan Charter: An International Charter for Health Promoting University and Colleges (2015) calls on post-secondary schools to embed health and wellness into all aspects of campus culture and to lead health promotion and collaboration. The Charter can be used as a framework to guide and inspire action for the integration of health and well-being policies and practices, and provide a common language, principles, and structure that graduate training programs, departments, and supervisors can utilize to become ambassadors for student health and well-being (Okanagan Charter, 2015).

Reflections

I consider myself very grateful and honoured to have been able to conduct my research with the five participants who chose to share both their graduate school challenges and self-care journeys with me and ultimately with you, the reader. I wanted to ensure that I could conduct research that was meaningful, but also ethical and beneficial for the individuals who participated. I hope I have honoured participants' stories in the spirit in which they were related. Through their experiences we have gained further insight into the phenomenon of self-care as it relates to graduate students in applied psychology. Participants accounts revealed the impact of ongoing stress that graduate students face, thoughtful descriptions of their self-care experiences as a process which is multi-faceted, and the challenges they face in prioritizing and maintaining self-care.

Embarking on this research journey was both exciting and daunting. I felt excited to contribute to this field of research through the examination of self-care experiences among graduate students in applied psychology. I have always had a passion to hear other people's stories, and I am so thankful that I could ask for, listen to, and ultimately share the stories of these five participants. I treasure the knowledge they have contributed to the impact of stress

on their well-being, their self-care experiences during their time as graduate students in applied psychology, and the challenges they face in prioritizing and maintaining self-care.

Both analyzing the data and writing my findings in Chapter Four were exciting pieces of this research. I felt I had a duty to my participants to communicate their experiences and spread awareness of this topic. The participants expressed gratitude that there was a researcher who was conducting research on the stress experienced by graduate students in applied psychology and examining their experiences with self-care in addressing ongoing personal, academic, or work-related stress. They hoped it would help other students who were experiencing challenges during graduate school by providing insight and knowledge. Since I have experienced multiple stressors during graduate school and have struggled to maintain my own self-care and well-being, I knew I had to practice careful bracketing and reflexivity throughout the analysis process. I continually reminded myself throughout the data analysis process that each interview I was reading was the participant's story, not mine, which allowed me to separate myself from the data and view it from a researcher's perspective. I engaged in self-care practices such as cycling and mindfulness meditation throughout the process to keep my mind clear and allow me to understand the assumptions that I had on this phenomenon. I believe that having a clear mind helped me be aware of new and surprising findings.

As engaging as this research was, there were times that it was daunting. While I was removed enough from several of my own stressful experiences during graduate school without having the content knock me down emotionally, there were a few sections that were difficult to write. Specifically, the section on guilt and the impact it had on participants who were parents. It made me wonder how my own experience with guilt affected my family as I

struggled to be everything for everybody, but often felt that I wasn't good for anybody, including myself. However, I reminded myself to be mindful; knowing I can't change the past but can focus on what I can do now to strengthen the relationships we have. I also reminded myself of the reasons why I was doing this research: In hopes that it can be used to help more students not feel alone in their struggles, that other students have a platform to share their challenges and experiences, to increase self-knowledge and well-being of graduate students in applied psychology, and in hopes that an open discussion of these components and the issue of self-care may aid academic training programs in continuing to cultivate an environment that offers the most comprehensive support possible for graduate students regarding stress, self-care, and wellness.

The strength and character that the participants exhibited as they worked to manage the challenges and stress of graduate school both moved and inspired me. I remember leaving the interviews with a feeling of hope, that the strength these participants showcased to help them persevere through difficult times could also encourage other students to discover ways to address and overcome their challenges. Through conducting this research, I hope that more students in applied psychology will feel comfortable speaking about their experiences with stress and self-care during their graduate school studies.

Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to explore the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. The study built on previous literature that highlighted the vulnerability of graduate students in applied psychology to stress, the importance of intentionally taking time for self to address self-care needs, engaging in approaches helpful in combatting stress and promoting optimal

functioning, and some of the challenges that come with prioritizing and maintaining self-care during graduate school (Carter & Barnett, 2014; Clark et al., 2009; Myers et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2005). However, there is limited research that takes a deeper exploration into how the stress of graduate school in applied psychology affects students and the impact it has on their self-care experiences. The current study sought to add to the existing literature on self-care by examining the experiences of five graduate students in an applied psychology program who encountered ongoing personal, academic, or work-place stress, their experiences with self-care, and how the prioritization and maintenance of self-care was impacted by the challenges they faced.

The theoretical orientation, methodology, and theoretical framework of this study all provided an ideal landscape to explore the lived experiences of graduate students in an applied psychology program. I believe that the following quote from Husserl (1900/70, p. 252) provides an appropriate commentary on the importance of using a phenomenological method for the current study: "we must go back to the 'things themselves'" to fully understand, describe, and appreciate the experiences.

Through the process of utilizing IPA to analyze transcribed interviews, two major findings emerged from this study: the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing stress were multi-faceted and composed of several layers, including recognizing vulnerability, understanding the importance of prioritizing the self, a shift in how they understood and approached self-care, and laying the foundation for addressing their individual self-care needs through a variety of approaches. Their self-care experiences were impacted by challenges, including time poverty and guilt which were interpreted as obstacles to prioritizing and maintaining self-care. It is hoped that the findings from the current study

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will be used to help other students not feel alone in their struggles, will encourage more students to share their challenges and experiences, will increase self-knowledge and well-being of graduate students in applied psychology, and create an open discussion of these components and the issue of self-care to aid academic training programs in continuing to cultivate an environment that offers the most comprehensive support possible for graduate students regarding stress, self-care, and wellness.

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UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

Have you experienced personal, academic, or work-related stress as a graduate student in applied psychology?

The purpose of this study is to examine the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. You are invited to participate in a research study titled *"Putting my best self forward:" An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Self-Care Among Graduate Students in Applied Psychology*.

I am a graduate student in School and Counselling Psychology at the University of Saskatchewan, looking for participants who meet the following criteria:

- Are a student of the School and Counselling Psychology graduate program at the University of Saskatchewan
- Are currently working in, or have completed a practicum placement as part of your graduate studies
- Currently living in Saskatchewan
- Have experienced personal, academic, or work-related stress during graduate school
- Able to speak about self-care experiences in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress during graduate school
- Are able to commit to a 45-90 minute individual interview conducted and audiotaped in person at the Qualitative Research Laboratory, Arts Building, University of Saskatchewan, 9 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK, S7N 0X1.

If you are interested, please contact Brent Wachs by email: brw131@usask.ca
Participants will receive an honorarium ($20 gift certificate) to defray the cost of parking and daycare.

This study has been reviewed by, and received approval through, the Research Ethics Office, University of Saskatchewan.	Managing personal, academic, or work-related stress study Brent Wachs brw131@mail.usask.ca	Managing personal, academic, or work-related stress study Brent Wachs brw131@mail.usask.ca	Managing personal, academic, or work-related stress study Brent Wachs brw131@mail.usask.ca	Managing personal, academic, or work-related stress study Brent Wachs brw131@mail.usask.ca	Managing personal, academic, or work-related stress study Brent Wachs brw131@mail.usask.ca	Managing personal, academic, or work-related stress study Brent Wachs brw131@mail.usask.ca	Managing personal, academic, or work-related stress study Brent Wachs brw131@mail.usask.ca	Managing personal, academic, or work-related stress study Brent Wachs brw131@mail.usask.ca

APPENDIX B: ELECTRONIC RECRUITMENT NOTICE

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

Have you experienced personal, academic, or work-related stress as a graduate student in applied psychology?

We are looking for participants who meet the following criteria:
- Are a student of the School and Counselling Psychology graduate program at the University of Saskatchewan
- Are currently working in, or have completed a practicum placement as part of your graduate studies
- Are currently living in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
- Have experienced personal, academic, or work-related stress during graduate school
- Are able to speak about self-care experiences in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress during graduate school
- Are not currently in a state of crisis (have not sought assistance for stress/crisis within the last 3 months)
- Are able to commit to a 45-90 minute individual interview conducted and audiotaped in person at the Qualitative Research Lab, Arts Building, University of Saskatchewan, 9 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK, S7N 0X1.

The purpose of the study is **to examine the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress** while enrolled at the University of Saskatchewan.

Participants will receive an honorarium ($20 gift certificate) to defray the cost of parking and daycare.

If you would like to participate, or would like to learn more, please contact the research assistant below.

For more information, contact:
Brent Wachs – brw131@usask.ca

This study has received approval from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Saskatchewan on 28/02/2019. BEH #821

APPENDIX C: TELEPHONE SCREENING GUIDE

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Researcher (R): Hello, I have received your email indicating your interest in participating in the study "Putting my best self forward:" An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Self-Care Among Graduate Students in Applied Psychology. Are you still interested in participating for this study?

> 1. R: I just want to confirm that you meet the criteria required. Are you a student of the School and Counselling Psychology program at the University of Saskatchewan? Are you currently working in or have completed a practicum placement as part of your graduate studies? Are you currently living in Saskatchewan? Have you experienced personal, academic, or work-related stress during graduate school? Can you speak about your self-care experiences in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress during graduate school? Are you not currently in a state of crisis (have not sought assistance for stress/crisis within the last 3 months)? Are you able to commit to a 45-90 minute individual interview conducted and audiotaped in person at the Qualitative Research Lab, Arts Building, University of Saskatchewan, 9 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK, S7N 0X1?

R: Great, then I invite you to participate in this study. I will be conducting one interview that will require approximately 45 to 90 minutes of your time.

R: I would like to set up a date and time for this interview. It will be held in room #1219 in the College of Education building.

If they do not fit criteria:

R: I'm looking for participants who do meet the criteria required and unfortunately you didn't meet criteria__ (insert criteria not met) __. You stated that you have sought assistance for stress/crisis in the last 3 months, therefore you do not meet eligibility requirements and this excludes you from the study. However, I would like to offer you a list of community supports you can access for guidance and/or care if required. Thank you for your interest in this study. If you wish to receive a copy of the results at the completion of the project, feel free to contact the student researcher, Brent Wachs at brw131@usask.ca, or the supervisor, Dr. Stephanie Martin at stephanie.martin@usask.ca.

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Project Title: "Putting my best self forward:" An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Self-Care Among Graduate Students in Applied Psychology

Researcher(s): Brent Wachs, Graduate Student, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan, brw131@usask.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Stephanie Martin, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, (306) 966-5259, stephanie.martin@usask.ca

Behavioural Research Ethics Approval: BEH #821

Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:
The purpose of this research is to explore the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress.

Procedures:
This study will consist of a semi-structured interview, meaning that I will have a list of questions that will be asked to allow you to speak to your self-care experiences in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress as a student in graduate studies in applied psychology. Since it is semi-structured, prompts and follow up questions may be asked, depending on your responses. Once the interview is complete, the student researcher will transcribe and analyze the transcripts. This allows me to build an integral relationship with the data. By listening and re-listening to the interviews while transcribing, I have the opportunity to return to the data and continue to build a deeper understanding of what has been shared before moving on to analysis, coding, and the development of themes across transcripts.

The individual interview will be conducted in person at the Qualitative Research Lab, Arts Building, 9 Campus Drive, on the University of Saskatchewan campus. The interviews will last approximately 45–90 minutes and will be audio recorded and then transcribed by the student researcher. Data from these recordings will be used for my (Brent Wachs) thesis. Data from the interview may be represented in the thesis through direct quotations. However, any identifying information will be removed, except for your chosen pseudonym.

Potential Risks:
The risks associated with this study are below minimal risk. However, you may experience discomfort when discussing your experiences with daily and long-term stress during your

time as a graduate student in applied psychology. Difficult memories may surface. However, you have the right to refuse to answer any questions that I ask, and you have the right to stop discussing topics at any time. You have the right to ask that the audio recorder be turned off at any time. If you experience any emotional discomfort as a result of your participation, a list of counselling supports in the city of Saskatoon is attached to this document.

Potential Benefits:
There are potential benefits of this study, however, they are not guaranteed. Talking about your self-care experiences in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress may allow you to gain a deeper understanding of your experience. Your participation may also lead to greater awareness of the challenges and stressors experienced by graduate students in applied psychology, enhanced dialogue on student development in the area of self-care and wellness, and the development of stress-management interventions for supporting students, led by the academic environment and incorporating student driven solutions.

Compensation:
Since the interviews will take place on the University of Saskatchewan campus, I will provide an honorarium ($20 gift certificate) to defray the cost of parking, daycare, etc. Participants who withdraw during the interview will still receive the gift card.

Confidentiality:
The results of this study will be discussed in a thesis required for completion of a master's degree. The findings will be available to the public through the thesis database. Any direct quote taken from the interview may be used; however, any identifying information about you and/or your circumstances will be changed, and names will be replaced with a pseudonym of your choice.

Storage of Data:
Data will consist of audiotapes and transcripts. The data and consent forms will be securely stored at the University of Saskatchewan by the faculty supervisor, Dr. Stephanie Martin in a locked office cabinet, for a minimum of five years upon the completion of the study. Consent forms will not be linked with the data and will be stored separately from the data. The student researcher shall be able to verify the authenticity of all data, or other factual information, generated in his research, while ensuring that confidentiality is protected where required. When the data is no longer required after the five-year retention period has passed, the student researcher will electronically wipe the data, deleting and destroying it beyond recovery.

Right to Withdraw:
Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If during the interview phase any question makes you uncomfortable, you have the right to skip that question. You will be able to request stoppage of the taping at the time during the interview and can request removal of a particular comment you have made. Participants will not have the opportunity to review and revise their statements after the interview, and prior to the data being included in the final report.

You are free to withdraw from the research project for any reason, without explanation or penalty of any sort. Should you choose to withdraw, you will be required to notify the student researcher in person, or via email, of your intention to withdraw. Any information gathered will be destroyed beyond recovery and you will still be given the reimbursement described above. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply up until June 20th, 2019, as data analysis will begin. After this point, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred.

Follow up:
Upon completion of the interview, feel free to contact the student researcher, Brent Wachs, or the supervisor, Dr. Stephanie Martin at the numbers provided above to obtain results from the study.

Questions or Concerns:
If you have any questions regarding the study, feel free to contact the student researcher, Brent Wachs, or the supervisor, Dr. Stephanie Martin at the numbers provided above. The University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board has approved this research project on ethical grounds. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office ethics.office@usask.ca (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

Consent:
Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided and have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

There are two options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. Please put a check mark on the corresponding line(s) that grants me your permission.

You may use direct quotations from my interview: Yes: _____ No: _____

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: _____

_____   _____   _____
    Name of Participant   *Signature*   *Date*

_____   _____
    Researcher's Signature   *Date*

A copy of this consent form will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

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<u>Demographic Information</u>

Age:

Sex:

Relationship status: married, partnered, divorced, in a relationship, single:

Parental status: parent (number of children_____), non-parent

Year in Graduate Program:

Initial Statement:

I am interested in examining the self-care experiences of graduate students in applied

psychology in managing personal, academic, or work-related stress. This is unique for each

individual, so please keep that in mind as you consider the following

questions.

Interview Questions:

1. Being a graduate student in applied psychology can be an emotionally, physically,

   and mentally stressful experience.

   o Can you tell me about some of the personal, academic, and work-related

     stressors you have experienced during your graduate studies?

   o What do these experiences mean to you?

   o How have these experiences affected you?

2. I am interested in learning about how you manage personal, academic, or work-

   related stressors as a graduate student in applied psychology.

- o Are you conscious about making decisions regarding self-care? Can you say more about this?
- o Do you prioritize self-care in your personal and professional roles? If so, how do you manage this?
- o What decisions have you made regarding self-care as a way of promoting wellness both personally and professionally?
- o What are some self-care approaches that have helped you be successful in addressing personal, academic, or work-related stress?
- o What specific barriers are there to engaging in self-care?
- o Can you say something about how you are able to find the time and energy to engage in self-care despite barriers you may have faced?
- o How does engagement in self-care affect you?

3. People may experience many different feelings when engaging in self-care.
   - o Can you say something about any negative/positive feelings you have experienced as a result of trying to manage personal, academic, or work-related stress during graduate school?
   - o Do you experience any feelings of guilt when choosing your own needs over other personal and professional obligations? Can you tell me more about that?
   - o What motivates you to continue engaging in self-care?

4. I am interested in understanding your observations regarding the practice of self-care as a way of promoting wellness in graduate students in applied psychology.

- o What do you think are some of the challenges facing other graduate students in applied psychology and what are some of the ways in which training programs can help individuals cope with these situations?

- o How can training programs better promote self-care for graduate students planning professional careers as applied psychologists?

- o Do you have any recommendations for present or future graduate students in applied psychology in regard to self-care?

- o Any other suggestions or comments regarding this topic?

5. Is there anything else I didn't ask that you think I should know about your experience with the role of self-care in managing the impact of daily and long-term personal and professional stress during your graduate studies in applied psychology?

Other probes that may be used:

- What do you mean?
- What was that like for you?
- Can you give me an example?
- What were you feeling at the time?
- Can you describe that more?

Check-ins:
- How are you doing as you discuss this topic?
- Are you ok to continue with the interview?
- Are you okay to the end of the interview?

APPENDIX F: COUNSELLING SERVICES SHEET

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

"Putting my best self forward:" An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Self-Care Among Graduate Students in Applied Psychology

If you experience any feelings of anxiety, depression, or are feeling unsettled and would like to talk with someone, below is a list of support you can contact in Saskatoon:

Student Wellness Centre
Rm. 310 3rd Floor Place Riel Student Centre
1 Campus Drive
(306) 966-5786
Fee: Free for U of S Student

Family Service Saskatoon
506 25th Street East
Saskatoon, SK S7K 4A7
(306) 244-0127
Fee: Sliding scale, based on income

CFS Saskatoon
200, 506 25th Street East
Saskatoon, SK S7K 4A7
(306) 244-7773

Mental Health and Addictions Services
156, 122 3rd Ave N
Saskatoon, SK S7K 2H6
(306) 655-7777

Mobile Crisis
24 hour crisis phone line
(306) 933-6200
Fee: Free