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**Customizing Professional Identity:  
A Model for Early Career Psychologists**

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**Customizing Professional Identity:  
A Model for Early Career Psychologists**

**by**

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For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord,  
plans to prosper and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV Study Bible)

**Customizing Professional Identity:  
A Model for Early Career Psychologists**

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The process of becoming a psychologist requires a great deal of time, energy, and training that results in a transformation from student to professional. Likening the developmental process of professional identity construction to the building of a custom home, the current study sought to understand the process whereby early career psychologists begin to “customize” their professional identities. With the understanding that the construction of professional identity is a lifelong developmental process, the current study provides a conceptualization of the important factors comprising customization. After the foundation of one’s professional career has been “laid and framed” throughout graduate training,

customization commences. As no two custom homes look completely alike, neither do the careers of two recently licensed psychologists.

Qualitative research methods afforded the opportunity to explore professional identity using in-depth interviews with eleven early career child psychologists who had graduated from doctoral training programs within the last two to six years. Upon thorough analysis of the interviews, a theoretical model emerged conceptualizing the decision-making process of early career psychologists during customization. The decision-making process is comprised of three components: connections, weighing options, and settling. Forces of reality and ideals were found to significantly impact decision making. Forces of reality exist outside of the individual and include romantic relationships, family, finances, and health issues. Ideals exist within the individual and are comprised of personal and professional interests, characteristics of self, and goals. Achieving balance between forces of reality and ideals in the context of the decision-making process is discussed.

The results of the current study hold implications for training and professional practice. It is hoped that results are used to inform training practices for students and establish mentoring programs for early career psychologists. Psychologists-in-training require time and experience to grapple with the forces of reality and ideals within the supportive context of graduate school. It is hoped

that such experiences will result in a shift of priorities for the early career psychologist, placing importance on the need to strive for balance between personal and professional factors, which will facilitate preparedness in making informed professional decisions.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The great majority of research studies have focused on the developmental process of the psychologist-in-training during the graduate school experience (Cross & Brown, 1983; Hogan, 1964; Larson, 1998). Although this is a very important time for the psychologist-to-be, it is situated within a larger developmental process of becoming a psychologist that continues throughout the course of one's career (Orlinsky et al., 1999; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Few studies have devoted attention to the development of psychologists after formal graduate training; fewer still have focused on psychologists whose practice includes children and adolescents (Orlinsky et al., 1999; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Additionally, the vast majority of published studies have explored development from a positivistic and objectivistic ideology using stage models as the primary means of conceptualization (Hogan, Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003; Larson, 1998; Stoltenberg, 1981; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987; Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998). In more recent studies, researchers have begun to view career development as ontogenetic, conceptualizing the developmental process as socially constructed, dynamic, and reflective of the diversity of an individual's lived experience (Chen, 2003). Relevant findings of published studies from both ideologies will be addressed in

the chapter that follows (Hogan, 1964; Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Stoltenberg et al., 1998).

The goal of the current research effort is to contribute to the existing research studies that have explored and addressed the developmental process of psychologists who are new to professional practice (Goodyear, Wertheimer, Cypers, & Rosemond, 2003; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). In light of Skovholt and Ronnestad's longitudinal study (1992), which served to define stages of therapist development across the life span, the current research effort focused specifically on the "exploratory stage" of therapist development. The "exploratory stage" describes psychologists who have graduated from training programs in the last 2 to 5 years. Skovholt and Ronnestad referred to the "exploring" nature of this stage as a time in life where the individual explores beyond the known with mixed confidence and anxiety in the professional work setting. Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003) updated their original model, collapsing stages into "phases," and renaming the "exploratory stage" as the "phase of the novice professional." This phase encompasses the critical transition period between graduate training and entry into the professional world. This is an extremely critical period of life for the new professional and spurred interest to complete the current investigation. While "novice

professional” has been cited in the literature (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; 2003), this term does not seem to sufficiently address the diversity and richness of the early career psychologist’s experiences. In light of the psychologist’s exposure to the professional field throughout graduate training and related work experiences, the term “early career psychologist” seems most reflective of the breadth of experience and knowledge base that the psychologist possesses rather than describing the individual as a “novice” professional. Thus, participants in the current study will be referred to as “early career psychologists.”

The use of qualitative research strategies allowed for the current exploration to obtain an appreciation for the vastness of human experience through the eyes of early career psychologists who were actively engaged in this developmental process. Eleven early career psychologists participated in the current investigation. The participants were drawn from a variety of doctoral training programs from coast to coast in counseling, school, or child clinical psychology, and were currently residing in the state of Texas at the time of the investigation. Each participant completed two interviews for the purpose of the current investigation. Because qualitative research in this area remains in its infancy, the current study expands the existing literature base by providing a better understanding of the decision-making process that occurs for the early career psychologist during the transition from student to professional. In addition,

this study examines in detail the relevant factors that affect the personal and professional development of early career psychologists during this season of life.

Grounded theory methods were primarily used along with selective narrative techniques and case study approaches to analyze the material that was collected throughout the interview process and throughout the meaning-making of the voluminous amount of data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Hill & Corbett, 1990, Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In studying and exploring the journeys of these psychologists and their transition from classroom to clinic, the data revealed that there were several important decisions being made as they stepped into the professional work force. From the current research efforts, a theoretical model emerged that serves to conceptualize this decision-making process of early career psychologists.

The following literature review contained in Chapter Two begins by examining the overarching construct of career development within the vocational psychology literature and the ontogenetic progression of career (Chen, 2003). Differing ideologies relating to career are discussed and the profession of psychology will be situated within the career development literature (Chen, 2003; Jepsen & Dickson, 2003). Primary pathways that contribute to the professional and personal development of psychologists are discussed, which include: the impact of meaningful interactions with clients, life experiences, and supervision

(Kahn & Harkavy-Friedman, 1997; Pope & Tabachnick, 1994; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1997). Three conceptual models of therapist development are reviewed, identifying the areas of convergence and divergence among these existing models (Hogan, 1964; Loganbill et al., 1982; Stoltenberg, Delworth, and McNeil, 1998). A longitudinal study conducted by Skovholt & Ronnestad (1992) along with their recent revisions (2003) will be presented in detail. Chapter Three discusses the methods used for data collection and analysis along with participant profiles of the eleven early career psychologists. Chapter Four highlights the salient findings and includes two case studies derived from the current qualitative investigation. Areas of convergence with the existing literature will be woven into the discussion of the theoretical model that emerged from the current investigation. Case studies allow the reader to walk through the decisions and lives of two early career psychologists in terms of the salient features of the theoretical model. Finally, Chapter Five discusses the contributions and implications of the current research study. In addition, future directions for research and considerations for training programs in light of the current findings are discussed.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In today's world, there is a distinct rise in the number of mental health concerns meriting professional attention. This rise in concerns is accompanied by a demand for trained professionals to serve this population clinically. Amongst the large number of individuals who are trained in the helping professions are licensed psychologists. The process of becoming a licensed psychologist requires a great deal of time, energy, and extensive graduate training and post-graduate learning experiences to develop the necessary skills to be called "psychologist" (Jones, 1996). This is a developmental process that, after a period of time and tremendous growth, results in a transformation of the individual from student to professional. Interestingly, a review of the literature reveals that while a voluminous number of studies have examined the different populations that psychologists serve, significantly fewer studies examine the professional development of psychologists (Goodyear, Wertheimer, Cypers, & Rosemond, 2003; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Additionally, of the studies conducted, the involved participants have been a combination of masters-level and doctoral-level therapists, with only a few studies focusing specifically on psychologists (Fouad, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Furthermore, of the studies that have been

conducted exploring the professional development of psychologists, no studies focused explicitly on psychologists who work primarily with children, adolescents, and their families; a population that is dramatically increasing in terms of their need for mental health services.

### Situating the Profession of Psychology

Prior to exploring the professional makings of a psychologist and the factors that influence the development of a psychologist, it is important to situate the profession of psychology within the career development literature (Savickas, 2002). The vocational psychology literature has spent decades attending to the means by which careers are constructed and how individuals make occupational choices that affect where they will focus their attention in their work lives (Savickas, 2002). Because there is a breadth of literature in this area, it is important to operationally define the development of career for the purpose of the current study (Savickas, 2002; Super, 1953). Interestingly, the word *vocational* is defined in the literature as “the responses an individual makes in choosing an occupation” (p.151, Savickas, 2002). In light of the fact that the responses of an individual are behavioral, the basic unit of study in vocational psychology is vocational behavior, with *career* defined as the development of vocational behavior over time (Savickas, 2002).

Career construction theory was designed to understand how individuals construct such careers and understanding vocational behaviors over the course of a lifespan (Savickas, 2002). Career construction theory deems career as “a reflection on the course of one’s subjective and objective experience of their vocational behavior” (p. 152, Savickas, 2002). Objective experiences of career are the actual events of one’s occupation. Subjective career is seen as the “reflexive project that transforms individuals from actors of their career to subjects in their own career story,” in essence this is truly the “telling of one’s story” (p. 152, Savickas, 2002). In addition to the variety of definitions for career, different perspectives exist as to how an individual’s career develops over time. The current study views career development from an ontogenetic perspective, namely, that the development of an individual’s career is a progressive dynamic process across the lifespan- involving continuity, maturation, and adaptation (Jepsen & Dickson, 2003; Savickas, 2002). Historically, the literature have described the progression and development of career in discrete stages, with each stage consisting of certain developmental tasks that must be “mastered” in order to move onto the next stage (Jepsen & Dickson, 2003; Shartle, 1959; Super 1953). While this approach provides a useful heuristic for understanding the developmental progression of career, it serves to oversimplify a process that is inherently complex and consists of a range of developmental tasks

and behaviors that cannot be adequately addressed within the context of a stage model.

Chen (2003) draws attention to the two bodies of literature that exist within the field of vocational psychology. One camp of theories is rooted primarily in positivistic and objectivistic beliefs, while the other camp of theories is derived from social constructivist ideology. Although traditional vocational psychology has adopted positivistic ideology to explain career development, the late 20<sup>th</sup> century ushered in the rise of the social constructivist perspective to explain vocational psychology in a different way (Chen, 2003). The social constructivist perspective views development as a complex and dynamic process that is an ever-changing interaction between the individual and his or her environment. This perspective considers the subjective intention of the person entering the career as essential to the overall development of “career,” seeing an individual’s career narrative as forever in a state of progress (Chen, 2003).

An individual’s career develops over the course of a lifetime. This process is best described as a complex and dynamic interaction between person and environment (Chen, 2003). From a constructivist perspective, it is crucial to consider the complex variables that comprise the context of one’s career and the contextual features that serve to influence the development of career (Chen, 2003; Jepsen & Cheu, 2003). Consistent with Savickas (2003), the current study agrees

with epistemological constructivism, which states “we construct representations of reality but diverge from ontologic constructivism that says we construct reality itself” (p. 154). The current study creates a deeper understanding of the interaction between person and environment and the factors that influence choices within the context of a career as a psychologist.

#### Pathways to Personal and Professional Development of Psychologists

Research has found that as the psychologist develops through professional training to help others using psychotherapy, he or she must also make a concerted effort to examine the development of self (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Before examining the developmental process in detail, there are a few assumptions of development that must be stated (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). These assumptions include: development always implies some sort of change; the change is organized systematically; and the change involves succession over time (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Research has shown that graduate students, consumed with learning how to help others in a professional context, may not have the adequate time and energy necessary to explore personal issues in any type of detail (Johns, 1996). Barnat (1980) writes that most trainees who are busy with the various requirements of graduate school are unable to partake in the “search for significance” outside of their emerging professional life. These rigorous requirements of the graduate school experience often limit opportunities

for personal development, necessitating that the emerging psychologist spend time outside the mandatory requirements of graduate school training pursuing personal development (Johns, 1996). A survey of graduate programs revealed that the majority of training programs tend to assimilate the students' family background, culture, and emotional health into the curriculum of didactic work and field experiences, rather than exploring components of the psychologist's identity as part of the training experience (Guy, 1987; Johns, 1996). Some of the factors mentioned in the literature that contribute to the development of the psychologist's identity throughout the graduate school experience and beyond include meaningful client interactions, life experiences, and supervision (Kahn & Harkavy-Friedman, 1997; Pope & Tabachnick, 1994; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1997; Wilkins, 1997). For the purpose of the current study, these three relevant factors will be explored in further detail.

#### *Meaningful Interactions with Clients*

Meaningful interactions with clients have been noted as a critical means to personal and professional changes in the psychologist (Kahn & Harkavy-Friedman, 1997). The psychologist can gain a great deal of information from his or her encounters with clients, especially when the professional is willing to be vulnerable and open, setting the tone for the psychotherapy session (Johns, 1996). The therapist's initiative, or lack thereof, to facilitate two-way communication

with the client can serve to open the door for greater communication to exist between therapist and client. Inability to establish such communication can serve to hinder or block communication from occurring (Wilkins, 1997). Although formal training during graduate school prepares the psychologist “hypothetically” for client interactions, a recent study indicates that it is the actual relationships and experiences with clients over time that fosters openness and a willingness to share (Kovitz, 1998).

Client interactions that are meaningful for the psychologist have also been referred to in the literature as moments of “client-induced” inspiration (Kahn & Harkavy-Friedman, 1997). Kahn and Harkavy-Friedman (1997) defined “inspiration” as the positive changes in the clinician’s emotions, cognitions, and behaviors that are attributable to working with particular clients (Kahn & Harkavy-Friedman, 1997). Kahn and Harkavy-Friedman (1997) surveyed over 300 clinicians examining their perceptions of experiences involving client inspiration and how they changed as a result of working with inspiring clients. A significant number of clinicians surveyed indicated that working with an inspiring adult client provides a positive role model for personal and interpersonal change in the clinician. Clinicians also reported that working with inspiring clients led to an increase in their general understanding about human beings and abandoning stereotypes. It is important to note that the current body of research fails to

differentiate between client interactions with adults versus children, leaving the reader to assume that the majority of psychologists surveyed were working with adult populations. As work with children has been described in the literature as a relevant factor to professional development, the essential features of child and adolescent psychotherapy will be addressed (Gabel & Bemporad, 1994; Moustakas, 1959; Schowalter, 1985).

### *Features of Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy*

The literature has also noted that there are unique factors to consider when a psychologist is working with children and adolescents in clinical practice (Gabel & Bemporad, 1994; Moustakas, 1959; Schowalter, 1985). Psychologists working with children and adolescents must have a working knowledge and understanding of child development to inform their views and interpretations of the child's responses and behaviors as well as an understanding of his or her own responses to the child and the therapeutic relationship (Schowalter & Pruett, 1975).

Understanding the ongoing nature of the developmental maturation process of children and adolescents also continually serves to inform the treatment process (Dube & Normandin, 1999). Therapy with children and adolescents can be seen as different from work with adults, namely, because of its focus on the "present, living experience," meaning that the psychologist meets the client where they are in the moment and deals directly and immediately with his or her feelings

(Moustakas, 1959). Dealing with children and adolescents in the “present moment” allows for the therapist to connect with the child immediately and facilitates establishing the therapeutic relationship with the client (Briggs, 1992; Bromfield, 1999; Moustakas, 1959; Showalter, 1985). Connecting in the present is also important because of the fact that communication with children can often be symbolic and less direct, e.g., through play or nonverbal gestures, which may leave a great deal of the therapeutic work to be interpreted by the therapist. This is very different from the primarily verbal interactions that therapists have with adolescent and adult clients, and can be a difficult transition for therapists who do not feel comfortable working in this manner (Showalter & Pruett, 1975).

Pertinent to psychotherapy with children and adolescents is the systemic work that takes place around the therapeutic hour (Bromfield, 1999; Reisman & Ribordy, 1993). In addition to the individual time that is spent with the child or adolescent in psychotherapy, the therapist must work with multiple parties or systems. Examples of the systems that the therapist could potentially work with include the child’s parents, the school, social services, and the larger community. Extended work with these systems outside of the therapeutic hour ensures that the work of therapy is carrying over into important domains of the client’s life and that the issues of the child are properly conceptualized and treated (Bromfield, 1999). Working with the different systems that are involved in a client’s life also

affords the therapist an opportunity to assist with the logistics of treatment in some cases (e.g., getting transportation to a session, funding for therapy sessions) as well as ensuring compliance with treatment plans (Anthony, 1986).

In light of the factors involved in therapeutic work with children and adolescents, many psychologists resist working clinically with this population. For some psychologists, the fact that children are accompanied by parents, who may be demanding and difficult, creates anxiety for the therapist and adds stress to one's caseload (Anthony, 1986). Other psychologists resist working therapeutically with children because child clients are difficult to obtain, immature, exacting to treat, and unavailable within school hours (Anthony, 1986; Bernstein & Glenn, 1988). Gabel and Bemporad (1994) add that therapist resistance may occur when the therapist becomes aware of his or her own childhood issues that may be elicited by the child client as well as resistance to being placed into a parental role by the child client (Bernstein & Glenn, 1988). In such cases, the psychologist may develop strong reactions to the child or the parental figures in the child's life, which the psychologist will most definitely need to address. Consistent difficulty in these areas over time has been found to result in the psychologist choosing to work solely with adult clients in treatment (Gabel & Bemporad, 1994).

Schowalter and Pruett (1975) found that the stressful demands of working with children may result in the psychologist leaving the field at some point throughout his or her career. Although less emphasis has been given to the development of psychologists who practice psychotherapy with children and adolescents, the literature indicates that this “neglected” group of professionals has to understand their own emotional issues, reactions, and development just as much, if not more, than psychologists who work primarily with adult populations (Anthony, 1986; Schowalter, 1985). To work effectively with the different expectations that accompany therapeutic work with children and families, psychologists must work through their thoughts and feelings regarding their own experience in childhood as well as experiences they have had with children and parents that could potentially confound their professional work (Gabel & Bemporad, 1994). Ultimately, any psychologist who is practicing psychotherapy must find his or her own route to personal growth that is consistent with his or her own philosophy and practice (Wilkins, 1997). Jones (1996) effectively summarizes this principle in stating that “you can only take a client as far as you have gone yourself.”

### *Life Experiences*

Personal experiences in the life of the psychologist serve as a pathway to development. The term *transformation* has been used to describe the changes

that occur for the psychologist in the progression from the graduate school training context to the professional practice context of working directly with clients (Jones, 1996; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Life experiences that have been noted to contribute to this transformation include: relationship experiences; major life transitions (e.g., birth of a child, marriage, divorce); personal therapy, or times of spiritual awakening (Goldfried, 2000; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Wilkins, 1997).

Personal therapy is a life experience that has received a significant amount of attention in the literature as a mechanism through which personal and professional development occurs in the psychologist (Hilliard, Henry, & Strupp, 2000; Macran, Stiles, & Smith, 1999; Pope & Tabachnick, 1994; Wilkins, 1997). Personal therapy is a prescribed time for the therapist to explore personal material as well as develop an awareness of issues and conflicts that could potentially interfere with their professional work with clients (Macran et al., 1999; Wilkins, 1997). The therapy experience for the psychologist provides a unique opportunity for the therapist to “get into the shoes of the client,” experiencing what it is like to be on the other side of therapy (Macran et al., 1999). Getting on the other side of therapy as a client has been described as a “humbling and enlightening experience,” which allows for the psychologist to experience empathy for the client and take care of oneself (Macran et al, 1999).

In light of the positive factors that have been discussed related to personal therapy for psychologists, a growing debate has emerged as to whether or not personal therapy should be a mandatory experience in graduate training programs (Freud, 1964; Macran et al., 1999; Rosen, 1997). From surveys asking professionals whether or not to include personal therapy as a formal training requirement in graduate programs, to outcome studies examining the benefits of personal therapy on practice, researchers have attempted to understand more precisely how the experience of personal therapy affects clinical development and practice (Kaslow & Friedman, 1984; Macran & Shapiro, 1998; Pope & Tabachnick, 1994). Results of these studies indicate that psychologists involved in personal therapy report having the ability to be more sensitive and empathic with clients, to take care of their psychological needs, and to express their “real self,” including dealing with areas of psychological distress in their own lives (Macran et al., 1999; Pope & Tabachnick, 1994).

In a national survey conducted by Pope and Tabachnick (1994), out of the 476 psychologists who were surveyed, 400 responded having been a client in therapy at some point in their life, with the median time in therapy approximately 4 years. Of the sample, 85% reported that their experiences with therapy were helpful or “exceptionally helpful,” with those who were in therapy strongly supporting the notion that personal therapy should be a requirement of graduate

training programs and licensure requirements (Pope & Tabachnick, 1994). An earlier interview study of clinical psychology graduate students conducted by Kaslow & Friedman (1984) found that students who were in therapy while pursuing their doctoral degree described personal therapy as more influential than supervision in the development of clinicians (Kaslow & Friedman, 1984). Although research is continuing to emerge in this area, a thorough examination of the life experiences, beliefs, and problems of therapists as patients remains in its infancy stage (Pope & Tabachnick, 1994). Thus, the current study hopes to expand on the current research efforts by examining the role of life experiences, including personal therapy, as they contribute to the development of psychologists.

### *Mentoring and Supervision*

Psychotherapy supervision and mentor relationships are another factor that contributes to the development of a psychologist's professional and personal identity (Cohen & DeBetz, 1977; Johns, 1996; Larson, 1998; Loganbill Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1997; Watkins, 1995; Yogev, 1982). The supervision relationship has been described as an intensive and focused, one-to-one relationship involving a skilled therapist (supervisor) who facilitates the development of therapeutic competence in the psychologist in training (Loganbill et al., 1982). The importance of mentor relationships has been continuously cited

in the literature as an important vehicle to discovery learning and modeling (Allen, McManus, & Russell, 1999; Koberg, Boss, & Goodman, 1998). Mentors may be supervisors as well as more advanced students in psychology, or even peers (Allen et al., 1999). Psychotherapy supervision is a recognized means where students and professionals can learn about the art and craft of psychotherapy (Watkins, 1995). The supervision hour is a time reserved for the psychologist in training to meet with the supervisor on a consistent basis to discuss interactions, experiences, and changes that are occurring with clients in psychotherapy. Just as psychotherapy is an opportunity for change in clients, supervision provides an environment for the psychologist in training to develop new skills and grow professionally and personally (Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987). The ideal supervision relationship examines the intricacies of the therapeutic relationship as well as understands the intricacies of the supervisory relationship and works with the psychologist in training to develop an awareness of both types of relationships (Loganbill et al., 1982). The outcome of the focused one-to-one monitoring of the trainee's work and case management has the potential to contribute to the professional and personal development of the psychologist (Berlin, 1960).

Yogev (1982) describes three foci of supervision for the therapist in training: 1) facilitating personal growth and awareness, 2) acquiring practical skills, and 3) mastering cognitive and theoretical knowledge. Because of the nature of the supervisory relationship and its focus on understanding client material, discussion of the trainee's personal issues is typically limited to issues that are evoked by client material in session, which may account in part for why some individuals seek out counseling opportunities outside of supervision to deal with their own personal material (Yogev, 1982).

Envisioning a spiral can be a useful illustration to understand how therapists in training come to deal with personal issues and concerns within the context of supervision (Bruner, 1960). If learning occurs in a spiral, the student will gradually acquire information as she or he progresses throughout the coils of the spiral. With each circular rotation, the therapist will continually revisit basic issues, principles, and values that she or he is exposed to throughout the training process. By revisiting these issues, the therapist begins to develop a foundation of core values that will contribute to the individual's personal and professional identity and encounters with different types of clients (Wilkins, 1997). The supervisor can be seen as a scaffold, a presence to help facilitate personal growth and professional development; however, the majority of development lies within the control of the therapist in training (Guy, 1987).

## The Makings of a Psychologist

Meaningful client interactions, life experiences, and supervision are pathways cited in the literature found to contribute to the professional and personal development of the psychologist (Kahn & Harkavy-Friedman, 1997; Pope & Tabachnik, 1994; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987). Research indicates that the nature and timing of the professional and personal growth of the psychologist largely depends on the innate and inherent capacities of the individual (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

Psychologists who supervise graduate students in a clinical context have conducted several studies in attempts to understand this growth process for the psychologist (Hogan, 1964; Larson, 1998; Littrell, Lee-Borden, & Lorenz, 1979; Loganbill et al., 1982; Schlessinger, 1966; Stoltenberg, 1981; 1998; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987; Stoltenberg, McNeil, & Delworth, 1998, Yogev, 1982). Because clinical supervisors have initiated a large number of these studies, it is not surprising that the supervisory context has been extensively studied (Crosse & Browne, 1983; Hogan, 1964; Larson, 1998; Littrell et al., 1979; Loganbill et al., 1982; Stoltenberg, 1981; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987; Stoltenberg et al., 1998, Yogev, 1982). Current models of therapist development provide a foundation useful in understanding the progression of the psychologist from classroom to clinic as well as describing the factors that contribute to the personal and

professional development of the psychologist (Blocher, 1983; Hogan, 1964; Larson, 1998; Littrell et al., 1979; Loganbill et al., 1982; Salkind, 1985; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Stoltenberg 1981; 1998; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987; Stoltenberg, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Stoltenberg et al., 1998; Watkins, 1995; Yogev, 1982).

### *Developmental Models*

Because an exhaustive review of the plethora of models in existence expands beyond the scope of the current review, the present discussion will focus on four developmental models that have been cited extensively within the literature (Hogan, 1964; Loganbill et al., 1982; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Stoltenberg et al., 1998). Developmental models are rooted in the seminal works of psychology greats including Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson, pioneers in advancing the current understanding of human development and the developmental process (Erikson, 1963; Flavell, 1963; Lerner, 1986).

Developmental models also provide a conceptual framework to track progress that is made with regards to a particular phenomenon or process of interest. Watkins (1995) expounds on such definitions by highlighting three assumptions made by developmental models: 1) the trainee, in the noted “struggle” to become a psychotherapist, passes through a series of developmental stages; 2) each of these stages involves certain developmental issues and concerns that the trainee must

deal with; 3) the supervisor, to most effectively help trainees, should consider the developmental level of the trainee and tailor his or her feedback to the trainee accordingly.

#### *An Early Model of Therapist Development*

Richard Hogan's model of therapist development (1964) has been noted as the hallmark model in the area of therapist development. His model (1964) provides the first holistic look at therapist development and has served to inform subsequent models of therapist development that have emerged in the field (Loganbill et al., 1981; Stoltenberg, 1981; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987). Hogan's model describes therapist development in terms of four stages or levels (One through Four), highlighting the responses and reactions elicited by the psychologist in training as well as the supervisor throughout this process.

At the earliest stages of training, therapists are described as insecure and dependent, highly motivated to work hard and succeed, with little insight into their own motivation for being a psychotherapist. The role of the supervisor is to support and encourage the therapist as he or she learns to mirror technique through imitation of the supervisor. At Level Two, the therapist is now struggling with a dependency-autonomy dynamic with his or her supervisor. The therapist may experience conflict as he or she oscillates between wanting to be independent and at the same time, wanting to depend on the supervisor. Motivation of the

therapist fluctuates as he or she works to find a balance between feeling overconfident at times and overwhelmed at other times. The role of the supervisor is similar to Level One, as a supportive, listening ear and encourager to the therapist as he or she encounters these different feelings and experiences. Personal psychotherapy for the new therapist may also be recommended at this point.

Level Three is referred to as the “conditional dependency stage,” characterized by a heightened sense of professional self-confidence on behalf of the therapist, while continuing to maintain the supervision relationship. Therapists’ motivation is described as “more stable.” Unlike Levels One and Two, the therapist has now gained insight into personal motivation for the therapeutic work, which allows the individual to make a renewed commitment to the profession. The role of the supervisor becomes more of a collaborative consultant rather than an instructor. The final stage of Hogan’s model is referred to as the “master psychologist” level. The dependency-autonomy conflict described in Level Two has been resolved, with the therapist functioning as an autonomous professional with a higher level of insight into his or her own motivation for the clinical work. The therapist is now able to independently recognize personal and professional issues that may impact such work with clients. The role of the supervisory relationship is not mentioned at this stage,

which leads readers to believe the core elements of this relationship have been internalized, with the therapist seeking collegial supervision on an as-needed basis.

Critics of Hogan's model state that while this model sets up a general guideline for understanding therapist development, it appears to oversimplify a complex process, leaving many gaps in the model (Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987). Because of the gaps that exist with Hogan's model, in order to understand the processes that are described therein, researchers needed to seek out existent theories of development and further explore this research phenomenon.

#### *A Conceptual Model of Therapist Development*

Expanding on Hogan's model (1964) and the work of Arthur Chickering (1969), Loganbill, Hardy, and Delworth (1982) proposed a model of therapist development involving three primary stages. The model emerged from the assumption that counselor development is continuous and ongoing throughout one's professional life span (Loganbill et al., 1982). Thus, although the therapist in training progresses throughout these stages in a continuous, sequential manner, changes in the life of the therapist may result in revisiting derivatives of earlier stages and working through personal issues as the individual is exposed to the different tasks and professional activities in counseling and psychotherapy.

The hallmark characteristic of Stage One, also referred to as “stagnation.” is the “naïve unawareness” demonstrated by the therapist related to the importance of the supervisory process. This unawareness also pertains to the therapist’s understanding of how his or her personal issues may affect this process. The therapist is particularly susceptible to “blind spots” in the early phases of clinical work, which may lead to stagnation in the supervisory relationship as well as in the therapist’s clinical work. The authors (1982) state that beginning therapists often have a naïve sense of security, utilizing overly simplistic, concrete thought processes, which prevent the therapist from developing insight in this early stage about how one’s actions affect the therapeutic relationship.

A marked shift occurs in the development of the therapist moving from Stage One to Stage Two. There is a tremendous amount of cognitive dissonance for the therapist during this stage, as the therapist begins to leave the concrete thought processes of Stage One and begins to incorporate some of his or her own attitudes, emotions, and behaviors into the process (Loganbill et al., 1982). Stage Two is referred to in the literature as a state of “confusion,” namely because of the fact that the hallmark features of this stage are instability, disorganization, erratic fluctuations, disruption, confusion, and conflict. The therapist vacillates between feelings of failure and incompetence to feelings of great expertise and ability as

he or she begins to perform clinical work. This results in confusion and ambivalence for the therapist, knowing that he or she may possess certain valuable skills or competencies, but remaining confused as to how such skills are perceived by others and the outside world.

Moving from Stage Two to Stage Three is described as a welcome change for the beginning therapist, resulting in an integration of the intense emotional factors that the therapist in training was exposed to throughout Stage Two. The therapist is now described as possessing a “solid, realistic view self and of the competencies which he or she possesses” (p. 19, Loganbill et al., 1982). The therapist comes to a basic acceptance of stronger and weaker aspects of his or her functioning, and is no longer overly anxious when exposed to weaker, less well-developed areas of self. This insight allows for the therapist to engage in self-reflective processes, using introspection as well as feedback from others, including supervisors, to promote growth and continual development. All of these factors combine to arrive at a conceptual understanding during this third stage of development (Loganbill, et al., 1982).

Although the model purported by Loganbill and colleagues (1982) highlights the salience of the supervisory relationship as a contributor to therapist development, the personal development of therapists appears to be masked in their model. Understanding how the transitions occur between the stages of

development is also unclear. This may be due in part to the fact that specific and unique characteristics related to the developmental progression from one stage to the next stage are not included in the model (Holloway, 1987). To the credit of Loganbill and colleagues, their model acknowledges that the development of the therapist is more intricate and complex than the scope of a stage model noting that the model is best used as a heuristic to illustrate salient issues that will be encountered throughout the training process.

#### *An Integrated Model of Therapist Development*

The integrated model of therapist development proposed by Stoltenberg and colleagues has evolved, building on the earlier works of Hogan (1953), Loganbill and colleagues (1981), and earlier works by Stoltenberg and colleagues (Stoltenberg, 1981; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987). This comprehensive model describes three levels of therapist development, giving attention to three overriding structures that serve as “markers” to assess professional growth in developing therapists: self-other awareness, motivation, and autonomy (Stoltenberg et al., 1998). Self-other awareness refers to the therapist’s cognitive and affective awareness of his or her own issues as well as having an awareness of the client’s world. Cognitive awareness refers to the content of the thought process characteristic across all three levels, with affective awareness accounting for changes in therapist emotions, such as anxiety. Motivation is used to describe

the trainee's interest, investment, and involvement in the clinical training experience. Finally, autonomy refers to changes over time in relation to the degree of perceived independence in the supervisory relationship by the therapist, ranging from autonomous to dependent in this relationship. The model (1998) also posits that the three structures-- self-other awareness, motivation, and autonomy-- continue to develop and grow as the therapist progresses throughout training and throughout the duration of one's professional career.

Early in development, the therapist is found to be extremely self-focused, working to learn and understand new skills, theories, and strategies. This self-focus leaves little mental capacity to attend to or consider client perspective (other awareness) as well as the therapist's own personal process. Research has confirmed that this self-focus, in the early stages, can result in significant anxiety for the beginning therapist, leading to dependence on the supervisor to create a supportive, structured atmosphere that allows for the therapist to express feelings and explore questions (Stoltenberg, 1981; Stoltenberg et al., 1998). Therapist motivation tends to be high, namely because of the therapist's energy created by the newness of entering the field as well as his or her desire to succeed at their chosen profession and "change the world."

At the second stage, the therapist moves away from high reliance on the structured, dependent relationship with the supervisor in Level 1 and begins to

move towards more independent functioning. At this level, the therapist begins to focus on the client experience (other awareness), moving away from exclusive self-focus. The therapist is developing ideas and gaining knowledge through experience and supervision; however the individual remains dependent on the supervisor for direction in various cases where experience and confidence are lacking. Therapist motivation at this level of development tends to fluctuate, as the therapist questions his or her skills as well as level of confidence as it relates to therapeutic work with clients.

The therapist may become confused, “forgetting” tasks discussed during supervision or not being prepared for session. This confusion may also result in an overestimation or underestimation of the therapist’s perceived skills. These issues will need to be addressed within the context of the supervisory relationship, paying close attention to how the perceived competence of the therapist, or lack thereof, is affecting client interactions.

During the final stage, less structure is provided in the supervisory relationship, with the supervisor encouraging the therapist to become increasingly autonomous. The autonomy of the therapist allows for consideration of input from the supervisor and other perspectives, without being overly critical or overly accepting of feedback. In contrast to the extreme self-focus of the Level 1 therapist, or the primary “other focus” on the client of the Level 2 therapist, the

therapist is able to focus on the client as well as attend to personal reactions and professional knowledge. The therapist has developed an appropriate balance of self-other awareness, including openness to self-exploration and consideration for other perspectives beyond the client's personal reactions to session material. An overall understanding of the therapeutic process in the Level 3 therapist allows for the individual to tolerate ambiguity and temporary states of confusion, which is very difficult for the therapist at earlier stages. Progressing through this stage, the therapist emerges capable of working with a diverse range of clients and clinical issues. Stoltenberg and colleagues (1998) note that adequate supervision is pivotal to progress through the levels of development. In the extensive emphasis on the role of supervision, however, little attention is given to other factors that may contribute to the development of the therapist (Holloway, 1987). Critics of this stage theory question the universality of the stages that are suggested by the authors (1998) as well as the invariable sequencing of the stages (Larson, 1998). Because this model relies heavily on the input of supervising psychologists, there are some questions in reference to the applicability of this model (Larson, 1998). Because professional identity cannot be held separate from other areas of one's self, changes must be addressed outside the context of the supervisory situation in order to validate the developmental nature of the learning process for the therapist in training (Holloway, 1987).

### *A Qualitative Study of Therapist Development*

With the existing body of research examining the development of the psychologist as it pertains to the supervisory relationship during the graduate school, researchers have recently become interested in examining other facets of the development of the psychologist across the lifespan (Fouad, 2003; Larson, 1998; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In a seminal research study, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) conducted a qualitative investigation of 100 psychologists at different points throughout their professional career. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant served as the means to examine professional development. Meeting with psychologists at different points in their careers allowed for the researchers to talk with a vast array of professionals, ranging from psychologists with very limited experience (still in graduate school) to forty years post-graduate school experience (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Such research efforts culminated in a model of development that accounted for psychologists' perspectives across the lifespan. This model has been coined as the "evolution of the professional self," namely due to the fact that the model chronicles the progression of the lay helper through the detailed experiences of a licensed psychologist (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). The following stages were identified: 1) conventional; 2) transition to professional training; 3) imitation of

experts; 4) conditional autonomy; 5) exploration; 6) integration; 7) individuation; and 8) integrity (See Table 1 for further description). Although all of the eight stages have very unique features, Stages 2 through 5, into the beginning of Stage 6, capture the critical periods of transition for the developing psychologist that serve to inform the current study. These stages culminate in the exploration and integration stages, which appears to capture a period of critical transition as the therapist moves from student to professional and is confronted with the challenges of developing personally and professionally for the first time autonomously (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). In the last year, Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003) published an article reformulating the results of their original longitudinal study (1992). Of primary interest was the renaming of “stages” into “phases,” and the consolidation of themes of the qualitative investigation, arriving at 14 themes that continue to be germane a decade later. The six phases include: 1) the lay helper; 2) the beginning student; 3) the advanced student; 4) the novice professional; 5) the experienced professional; and 6) the senior professional. In reviewing the revisions to the original study, it appears that the current investigation is situated within the novice professional phase of professional development (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

### *The Exploratory Stage / Novice Professional Phase*

During the interval of time that encompasses this period of development, the psychologist is experiencing the transformation from student to emerging professional. By the time the psychologist reaches the novice professional phase, they have recently finished graduate work, the clinical internship experience and postdoctoral year, and are now entering the professional field (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). One of the hallmark features of individuals in the novice professional phase is the release of mentor relationships from graduate school and internship training and a sense of newfound independence, often for the first time since entering the graduate training program. The novice professional phase is described in the research as a marked time of transition, including changes in thoughts, feelings, and motivation for the developing psychologist. The period of time that is encapsulated by this stage appears to span several years and is described in the literature as being “intense and engaging,” with “many challenges to master and many choices to be made” (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Although after completing a doctoral program, early career psychologists may feel free and confident they may also at the same time feel inadequate, disillusioned, and anxious with the profound realization that “all I ever needed to know I did not learn in graduate school.” Developing psychologists will need to work through these mixed emotions and make occupational choices about how

they want to actualize their doctoral degrees, which will inevitably result in personal and professional development for early career psychologists.

This stage appears to embrace so much more than just exploring; rather it appears to be a time of resolve in which the important questions in one's life are continuously addressed – Who am I professionally? Who am I personally? What parts of myself do I want to use in my clinical work? What parts of myself am I still questioning? The nature of these questions, the learning process behind them, and the decisions that will be made highlight the importance of self-reflection, as the individual begins taking responsibility for his or her own understanding. In an article responding to the model purported by Ronnestad & Skovholt (2003), Fouad (2003) highlights the need to explicitly address the novice professional therapist's negotiation of exactly how she or he wants to fit work into their lives. While the role of self in the therapeutic alliance has been addressed, the self outside of therapy has not been researched. Expectations of novice counselors are to be able to negotiate the multiple and complex tasks of learning discovery of self as practitioner, then discovery of self as a practitioner who plays many non-practitioner roles. This developmental task differs from many other professions.

## Rationale for the Current Study

Although Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) address the need for self-reflection throughout professional development, an in-depth look at how developing professionals work through personal and professional issues appears to be lost in the model's emphasis on the resolution of issues rather than exploring the nuance of each phase. Stoltenberg and colleagues (1998) highlight that professional identity and personal growth tend to follow a less linear path, which is difficult to track and describe given the available models of therapist development. Additionally, the interviews conducted by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) focused primarily on professionals working with adult populations, leaving the reader to speculate on the degree to which the findings from this study apply to psychologists working with children, adolescents and families. Although the Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) model is different in some ways from the other developmental models, it leaves many of the same issues and questions yet to be understood.

Current research efforts hope to unpack the decision-making process that takes place for the psychologist as she or he progresses from the classroom to the clinic, with attention to the personal and professional factors that are affecting the life of the individual during this important season of life. Moving from the classroom to the clinic, the current study will target professionals within the last

two to six years of obtaining the doctoral degrees. By using in-depth interviews with psychologists, it is hoped that the current study will identify the struggles and victories that have influenced the personal and professional development of the psychologist, and the factors that have contributed to this developmental process. Using open-ended questions, the current study engages participants in a dialogue that will identify personal and professional mile markers along the psychologist's pathway to development. Results of this study will be used to inform current graduate training programs and the continuing education of professionals, as well as inform practitioners in the field as to the issues that the professional may encounter personally and professionally after completing a season of formal training.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHOD

*If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?*

*Albert Einstein*

Prior to beginning the study, I was interested in the developmental process that early career psychologists go through as they evolve from student to professional. I was also interested the primary sources of influence for the early career psychologist during that critical period of time. Using qualitative methodology, the goal of the current research effort was to develop a theoretical model from the data that was rooted in the perspectives of the participants, using their very words in attempts to capture the most salient aspects of the experiences faced by these 11 psychologists. The current research project yielded volumes of rich data that served to inform the emerging theoretical model, a model that would address the decision-making process of early career psychologists. Throughout the data analysis, the data revealed continuously the decisions that early career psychologists are faced with, how they come to choose certain positions in the field, and how they considered personal and professional factors that were going on in their lives at that time. Thus, the focus of the theoretical model focused on how the early career psychologist constructs his or her professional identity through decision making, giving attention to the dynamic interplay between

factors of their personal development (forces of reality) and professional development (ideals).

I have always been fascinated with the idea of storytelling.

Accompanying the psychologist on a storied journey back in time seemed like the ideal fashion to allow the individual to recall with some clarity his or her process along the road to becoming a psychologist. Through this process, the individual also recalled the critical decisions that were made along the way, including one's decision to enter graduate school and ending with his or her current professional endeavors and personal undertakings. This journey encompassed the necessary training experiences of graduate school, internship, and post-doctoral year.

The retelling of the participants' journeys was designed to explore the developmental process of becoming a psychologist. These stories included a finite beginning, with one's decision to enter graduate school, and a multitude of endings. Although there were many differences in the storied experiences of those I had the privilege of spending time with throughout the interview process, the common thread that existed throughout the telling of each story was the fact that development did occur, that each person was evolving in some form and growing in some way. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) refer to the fact that qualitative research creates "accounts of social life." Such stories are accounts of social life that serve to organize and shape our lives, providing a framework for

understanding. My impetus for telling the stories of these psychologists was birthed in the belief that early career psychologists must begin to understand their own story in order to work effectively with clients. These stories are best described as appendages of the self, and telling the story is an exercise in who a person is.

This type of investigation is well suited for qualitative methods (Maxwell, 1996). At the onset of this study, I did not know the form the emerging model would take, what the central tenets of my theory would be, or even which parts of the voluminous amount of data would be used in the dissertation. Throughout data analysis, while it became evident to me the importance of the decision-making process of the early career professional during the transition from student to professional, little did I know how intricate this distinct phase was.

In this chapter, the methodology used for the current study is presented. The rationale for using a qualitative research methodology is provided, followed by a brief description of the individuals who participated in the current research efforts. Next, the process used for interviewing and data collection procedures is outlined. The chapter ends with a description of the analysis procedures used, including the evaluative criteria employed to determine the “trustworthiness” of the research. Furthermore, there is a discussion of researcher biases that manifested during the course of the investigation and researcher assumptions that

were explored before, during, and upon completion of the qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### Rationale for Qualitative Research

Within the behavioral and social sciences, qualitative research methods have received recognition as an alternative approach to exploring and documenting diversity and life experience for individuals who live in a social world (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Glaser, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Scheurich, 1997). Qualitative research methods have been brought into psychology and the social sciences over the past three decades to provide naturalistic, descriptive, discovery-oriented inquiries that complement quantitative investigations. Thus, qualitative methods serve as an alternative to the quantitative research methods borrowed from the natural sciences that have dominated the social sciences through the greater portion of the twentieth century (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Janesick, 1998; Maione & Chenail, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Qualitative research methods have emerged as a major influence in contemporary research and practice, providing an alternative to traditional research methods and allowing for rich, descriptive information (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Janesick, 1998; Maione & Chenail, 1999).

## The Grounded Theory Approach

Grounded theory is a specific type of qualitative research methodology designed to develop theory through systematic study and analysis of data that accounts for the behavior and life experiences of individuals who are found in various contexts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). The term “grounded” refers to the generation of theory that occurs as a result of collecting, coding, and analyzing data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using a grounded theory approach, the researcher begins with a general area of study, with the ultimate focus of the research topic achieved through the collecting and analysis of the data. Data may consist of interviews and observations that are collected throughout the course of the research process. Grounded theory methodology provides a structured way of analyzing large amounts of textual data, which results in the discovery of important underlying concepts that represent the data at an abstract level (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Such methods provide a unique way of exploring, questioning, and thinking about the interview data, which leads to the discovery of concepts that help to explain the existing phenomena. Throughout this analysis, the researcher must attend to the subtleties of the data, separating the data throughout the coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After conducting the analytic process, the result is a theoretical model, firmly grounded in the data that serves to organize the relationships among these concepts and provides an in-depth

explanation regarding the phenomenon of interest (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). The phenomenon of interest for the purpose of the current study is the decision-making process of early career psychologists.

### Research Questions

The primary objective of grounded theory methodology is to develop a theoretical model to explain the phenomenon of interest (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). Research questions serve to identify the global focus of the phenomenon under investigation and guide the study. As is the case with qualitative research, there were no specific hypotheses to be tested at the onset of the study; rather there were questions asked to try to approach the data in a manner that would allow for some order in my exploration throughout the interview process. This type of exploratory orientation to qualitative research design and analysis was the most appropriate and served to be the most fruitful in arriving at the obtained results. Research questions started out broadly and were followed up throughout the interviews during each interaction with the participant. The relevant ideas and themes that were generated throughout these interviews served to refine and continually focus and refocus the study.

Approaching this topic of study, I originally sought to understand the developmental process of psychologists upon the completion of their training experiences, including graduate school, the clinical internship, and the post-

doctoral residency. I was interested in gaining an appreciation for the transition from student to professional, and the personal and professional development that occurs throughout this process. As the study evolved, I found myself interested in the decision-making process and the factors that influenced decision making during the transition from student to professional. This ultimately became the focus and phenomenon of interest. Using the grounded theory approach, theoretical conclusions that were made were based on the real-life, first-hand experiences and interpretations of the participants, reported in their own words to account for this story.

#### Procedure

#### *Participants*

A grounded theory study requires using *theoretical sampling* as a way of choosing participants in the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). Using this method, participants were identified and selected to represent the construct of interest and the developmental process under investigation. Utilizing theoretical sampling, participants were chosen who represented a range of experiences to provide an assortment and variety of information (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The participants for the current study included 11 psychologists who had graduated from doctoral training programs in professional psychology: including clinical, counseling, and school psychology. It was important that participants

had been exposed to coursework or practicum experience in psychotherapy at some point during their training experiences, in order to be considered for the current study. Psychologists who focused primarily on research to the exclusion of clinical work were not included for the purpose of this study. To meet criteria for the current study, all of the 11 participants had to have completed their clinical internship and post-doctoral residency within the last two to six years. In accordance with the state of Texas, the completion of these two training experiences is necessary prior to obtaining a license to practice psychology in the state. Ten out of the 11 participants in my study were licensed to practice psychology within the state of Texas. A second criteria to be included in the study required that participants worked in a professional context that provided the opportunity to utilize their clinical skills with different populations. Their work settings included; schools, private practice, community mental health centers, and inpatient treatment facilities. All participants were practicing psychology in Austin, Dallas, or their surrounding metropolitan areas.

Participants were identified through training directors at local universities as well as through personal contacts with internship training site coordinators in the greater Austin and Dallas metropolitan areas. The gender of participants varied, with seven females and four males. Ten of the participants in the study were of Caucasian decent, with one of Hispanic decent. Although age was not a

demographic that was asked of the participants, most participants were in their early to mid-thirties with two participants in their forties, and one participant in her fifties. Most participants in the current study were married at the time of the study- including Alex, Amanda, Denise, Fox, Martha, Nancy, Samantha, Sonia, and Tanya. Bill and Michael were single. Denise, Sonia, Martha, and Bill had all experienced a divorce before or during graduate school. Denise remarried early on during graduate school with Sonia and Martha remarrying after the internship year. Bill reported that he had entered a committed relationship in the recent past, but continues to consider himself single. Each participant with the exception of Alex, Michael, and Nancy experienced a change in their marital status during or after graduate school, either from single to married, married to divorced, or divorced to remarried.

To facilitate theoretical sampling, participants were drawn from a variety of training programs. Four participants were chosen from clinical psychology doctoral programs. Of these four participants, one female completed a Psy.D. program. Four participants were drawn from school psychology doctoral programs and the other three participants were chosen from counseling psychology doctoral programs. The various training programs represented a variety of states from coast to coast as well as exposure to a variety of theoretical orientations throughout training (e.g., psychoanalytic, behavioral, interpersonal,

and systems). The following table serves to illustrate the pertinent demographic information related to each participant as well as their current professional position. All names used have been changed to protect participants' identities.

Table 2: Participant Demographic Information

<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Specialty</i>	<i>Year Licensed</i>	<i>Current Position</i>
<i>Alex</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>Counseling Ph.D.</i>	<i>2002</i>	<i>Private practice</i>
<i>Amanda</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>Clinical Ph.D.</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>Inpatient wing at a hospital</i>
<i>Bill</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Divorced</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>School Ph.D.</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>Working in charter schools</i>
<i>Denise</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Remarried</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>School Ph.D.</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>Professor/private practice</i>
<i>Fox</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>Counseling Ph.D.</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>Schools/Private practice</i>
<i>Michael</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Single</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>School Ph.D.</i>	<i>2002</i>	<i>Working in public schools</i>
<i>Martha</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Remarried</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>Counseling Ph.D.</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>Director of nonprofit/p.p</i>
<i>Nancy</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>Clinical Psy.D.</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>Educational diagnostician</i>
<i>Samantha</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>School Ph.D.</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>Private practice</i>
<i>Sonia</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Remarried</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>Clinical Ph.D.</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>Director of nonprofit agency</i>
<i>Tanya</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>Dev./Clinical Ph.D.</i>	<i>2002</i>	<i>College Counseling Ctr.</i>

*Key: M/F = Male/Female C= Caucasian; H= Hispanic; p.p = private practice*

### *Participant Profiles*

The following participant profiles are necessary to introduce the individuals whose stories serve as the basis for the model that has emerged from this study. The profiles of the 11 participants are provided. The following participant profiles serve as a snapshot to orient the reader to the life of each

individual and to provide a context within which to understand him or her.

Important decisions in the life of the professional to be described here include one's decision to enter the field, work and training experiences, as well as decisions related to personal and professional growth. Although these profiles are not exhaustive by any means, they provide a glimpse into the lives of these participants and give the reader a sense of who these individuals are, both as people and professionals. These profiles will serve to help the reader make meaning of the results of the model presented in Chapter Four.

*Alex.* Prior to entering graduate school, Alex worked as a hot-tub engineer for several years. Prompted by his desire to “give back to people...something more important than designing hot tubs,” he decided to enter an undergraduate program in psychology. Having experienced a difficult time during adolescence with drugs and alcohol, Alex felt he could use these experiences to help others in similar situations. In 1994, Alex earned his bachelors degree, followed by a masters degree in family ecology in 1996. Alex always knew he was going to get his doctorate to do “the things he wanted to do in psychology.” For his doctorate, Alex chose a counseling program over a clinical program because of his view of people, seeing individuals “not much as broken and need to be fixed but needing more education or needing some help to make some changes.” He also chose a university that was affiliated with his spiritual beliefs, a program he believed

would allow him to “go deeper into philosophy and psychology and also explore spiritual beliefs as a Mormon.”

Alex married during graduate school and was the father of three children by the time he had finished his post-doctoral year. Financial sacrifices and struggling to “live on peanuts” was of primary concern for Alex as he was the sole support for his wife and children. Alex completed his internship and post-doctoral year in the same place in Texas because of the “convenience” of the position. Alex decided that he wanted to start his own private practice in Texas, mainly because it “didn’t make sense” to move his family again. Alex is now in his late thirties. In the last year, Alex has enjoyed the freedom of private practice. Being fluent in Spanish, he conducts several evaluations in Spanish each year throughout North Texas. Although he enjoys therapy, he has chosen to focus on assessment because of the higher pay. Most of all, Alex is thankful that he has been able to support his family and make a living in the field of psychology- one day at a time.

*Amanda.* Amanda declared psychology as her major during her freshman year of college. Growing up in a family of mental health professionals, Amanda was keenly aware of “what a psychologist can do and does do and what that means, both personally and professionally.” After graduating from college, with the help and guidance of her father, Amanda applied to various graduate programs

throughout the United States. After weighing her options, she decided on a clinical psychology program in Texas, leaving the East Coast where she had been born and raised. She entered graduate school in her early twenties and felt moving to a big city was a little “overwhelming.” She spent the next five years focused on school. She described herself as a “real list, task-oriented type of person,” who likes to have goals she can work towards.

In Amanda’s personal life, although she was focused on graduate school, she managed to meet her husband and the two were married following internship. In 2001, she gave birth to twin girls. At the time, Amanda thought she was going to stay home with her children, until she received word that her husband had lost his job in the technology industry. Reluctantly, Amanda made an important decision for her family in deciding to go back to work just months after her twin girls had been born. Although this was not her ideal plan, she reported that it was “kind of neat to get dressed up and talk grown up talk” and she has adjusted to working again. Since graduating with her doctorate, Amanda has had three different jobs spanning the last five years: including working in a private school as a consulting psychologist, as a clinical psychologist at a community mental health center, and now as a psychologist on the inpatient wing of a children’s hospital. Having been trained in clinical psychology, she enjoys working in a medical setting. Amanda is now in her mid thirties, and while she feels settled in

this position, she is unsure about her professional future because she would like a position with more flexibility that will best meet the needs of her two girls, who recently turned two years old.

*Bill.* Prior to entering graduate school, Bill was living on a tropical island, working as a musician. Living as a musician he was accustomed to living life “one day at a time” as a free spirit. Bill decided after feeling like he was “wasting away in Margaritaville” that he wanted to do something more with his life. He decided to go to graduate school for a masters degree on the East Coast and thereafter decided to pursue a doctorate in school psychology in Texas. Applying a similar philosophy to his graduate school experience that he had to the days when he was working as a musician, Bill took things “one semester at a time.” While Bill was free-spirited in many ways, the graduate school experience served to arrest his personal development. Bill described his social and emotional development during graduate school as being “on hold.” He graduated with his Ph.D. in 1998.

Personally, Bill married and divorced during graduate school. After graduate school, he went through a period of “waffling,” when he was not sure what he wanted to do professionally and where he wanted to practice. Not having finished his dissertation, he moved back to Texas for that purpose with the hopes of eventually becoming a psychologist in a community mental health center

“providing therapy to families, doing assessments and supervising other clinicians in those two areas.” Bill did finish the dissertation, but his goal of working full-time as a psychologist in a community mental health center never came to fruition. After two years of working part-time in a community mental health center and in the public schools, and a string of attempts to try to find a full-time position in a community mental health center, Bill found a position with a group of charter schools. He has worked with charter schools for the last two years. Bill is now in his mid thirties. In addition to working full-time with these schools, he has recently branched out into teaching at a local university and sees a few clients in private practice one night a week.

*Denise.* Prior to entering a doctoral program in 1992, Denise had been engaged in a variety of activities, both personally and professionally. In the late 1970s, Denise graduated with her degree in art and proceeded to teach art for a year. Terrified of teaching high school students at age 21, she decided to work at an art gallery, which she ultimately managed for the next seven years. After this experience, Denise decided to work for the family business. Over the next seven years while she was working for the family business, she and her husband divorced. After her divorce was final, Denise found herself parenting her daughter alone. Being the sole support for her prepubescent daughter, she decided it was time for a new beginning. Hailed by her friends as a “great

listener” and “someone they go to with their problems,” Denise decided to enter a graduate program to obtain her masters in counseling. After graduating in 1991, Denise worked for a year as a therapist. Although she enjoyed it, Denise felt like she needed more education. A year later she applied to graduate programs in counseling psychology. Her application was given to the school psychology training program because of her desire to work with children and adolescents. Denise is thankful that her application was given to school psychology and that she graduated from that program in four years. The year was 1997.

Personally, Denise remarried during graduate school. While Denise received her doctorate in school psychology, she considers herself “more than a school psychologist.” Denise is now in her early fifties. In the last year, she has secured a position on faculty at a local private college. She thoroughly enjoys this position and the ability to work with students. She also has a private practice and sees clients a few nights a week and on the weekends. A self-endorsed workaholic, Denise has recently had health problems related to her work habits. She is working to try and obtain a better balance between her personal life and professional obligations.

*Fox.* The defining moment for Fox that influenced his decision to pursue a career in psychology occurred at a family therapy retreat for his younger brother who, at the time, was in recovery at a substance abuse treatment facility. After

one of the family therapy sessions, a professional therapist pulled Fox aside and shared with him that he had incredible interpersonal skills and encouraged him to think about a future in psychology. After that weekend, Fox changed his major from pre-pharmacy to psychology and went on to graduate with a degree in psychology from a small liberal arts college. Wanting to continue his intellectual pursuits in graduate school, Fox immediately applied to several doctoral programs. He was rejected from every single program. He attributed this to the fact that he had gone to a small liberal arts school that was not research-focused. Having been rejected, Fox decided to move from Oregon to California and obtain a masters degree in psychology before reapplying to doctoral programs. Three years later, he applied for a second time and was accepted into a doctoral program in counseling psychology in the state of Texas. The year was 1992.

Fox has always been a hard worker and a go-getter, both professionally and personally. In his personal time, when he was not working, Fox played drums in a local band that had several gigs in clubs throughout north Texas. Music was an outlet and a stress relief for him that he enjoyed. Because of his commitments to work and the band, Fox rarely dated during graduate school. During internship, he met his wife and they married a year later. Fox is now in his mid-thirties. Reporting that he “has always felt like a child himself,” he enjoys working with young children. He described his therapy style as behavioral

and indicated that this orientation fits well with his personality. After working in private practice for a year and a half, Fox realized he needed a steady paycheck. To have a steady income, he took a job working for the public schools. In 2002, he went back to school to complete the necessary coursework in order to obtain the necessary licensure. Fox continues to see clients a couple of nights a week in private practice, staying in contact with his mentor who owns the practice. Fox has dreams of returning to practice full-time with his mentor; however, now is not the time.

*Martha.* Graduating in 1983 with a degree in romance languages, Martha had an interest in psychology but had no idea that her “interest in people” would transform into a career in psychology. Her interest in psychology led her to take a job as direct care provider to adolescents in an inpatient facility. Fascinated by human development and dissatisfied with the money she was making as a direct care provider, Martha decided to enter graduate school. The year was 1989. Throughout graduate school, Martha immersed herself in a wealth of learning experiences. Describing herself as “not in a hurry to get out of graduate school,” Martha made the most of her experience. Nine years later, she graduated with her Ph.D in 1999.

In Martha’s personal life, she divorced and remarried during graduate school. After a few miscarriages, she became pregnant with her twins, who are

now in their toddler years. For her postdoctoral experience, Martha found a position at a guidance center. She continued in this position after the postdoctoral year and began to settle in; however, the monetary compensation was not adequate to support her family. Martha, working as the sole provider while her husband finished school, decided to make a change, one that “allows her to provide for family and that is best for her vita,” but that required her leaving a work environment that “felt like home.” In the last year, she made the move to change positions. Currently, Martha works as a clinical director of a nonprofit agency designed to work with underserved populations. She has started seeing clients in private practice one night a week. She would eventually like to take a job that allows her more flexibility to be with her children, but she is not sure when the time will come for her to change positions.

*Michael.* Teaching in the Midwest for 10 years, Michael never dreamt he would one day go back to school to complete his doctorate. During his tenth year of teaching, Michael realized that he wanted to do something different, a position in which he would not burn out so quickly. He chose to go back to graduate school and decided on a program in school psychology, largely because of the fact that the schools were a context that he was familiar with and felt comfortable in. Because Michael had been teaching for many years, his graduate school experience was different than most. He was older than most of his cohort, which

allowed him to bring a different perspective to his training years. He enjoyed graduate school and felt affirmed by the good grades he received on “papers, tests, and stuff.” Never enjoying therapy, Michael developed a fondness for psychological assessment and has focused on assessment exclusively since his internship year.

Currently, Michael works in the school district where he completed his internship and post-doctoral experience. Michael is now in his early forties. He is single and has a goal of being in a romantic relationship some day, with the hopes of having a family of his own. He is involved with a church for gays and lesbians in hopes to meet someone. Although he enjoys his current position, he would like to be closer to his family in the Midwest. His sister recently had a baby and his parents are getting older, which has prompted Michael to start making connections in the Midwest. He hopes to find a position closer to family and settle in the next couple of years.

*Nancy.* For fifteen years, Nancy’s life consisted of being a corporate wife, concerned with the needs of her husband, being a good mother to her adopted son, traveling, and being active in her community on the East Coast. Her son had been diagnosed with several learning disabilities along with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, which caused significant distress on the family system. In 1995, Nancy made a decision to go back to school, taking one class at first and

then going back full-time after the first semester. Nancy went back to school later in life, motivated by a quest for understanding her son's behavior issues and unique learning needs. She was enthralled with her training program and learning many new things. She was "thankful" to have the supports she needed to manage her family while she was in school as the majority of her attention was diverted during this time. She hired drivers, maids, and tutors to ensure that the needs of her son and husband were met while she focused on getting her education. She loved the training opportunities, particularly the chance to work with internationally known professionals in the field. In graduate school, she embraced the psychodynamic perspective and to this day, continues to enjoy analyzing people and situations from this perspective. She graduated from her clinical psychology Psy.D. program in 2000.

Nancy is now in her late forties. She is working as an educational diagnostician in the state of Texas. At this time, she has decided to place her degree on hold to meet the needs of her family. She reported that should she make a decision to go back into psychology- it will be after her son graduates from high school; however, she has settled into her position, enjoys the freedom of having set hours, and cherishes her summer vacations.

*Sonia.* After graduating with a bachelor's degree in psychology on the East Coast, Sonia was ready to begin graduate school. Encouraged by a professor

in college who told Sonia, “you really gotta get your Ph.D. if you are going to do anything in psychology.” She said she thought, “Sure, why not?” With her parents encouraging her to “be all she could be,” she decided to apply to graduate schools all across the country and was accepted into one program in Texas. At the age of 21, Sonia packed up her car with all her belongings, including her pet iguana, and on her own drove down to Texas to begin a graduate program in clinical psychology. Feeling young and immature, Sonia did the best she could to try and focus on graduate school. She described having an intense focus on her graduate school experience, which resulted in a moratorium on her social and emotional development. This moratorium lasted throughout graduate school and internship. She reported that she began to mature emotionally after graduate school. Sonia graduated in 1999.

As for Sonia’s personal life, she was married and divorced during graduate school. After her internship, she met her current husband and they were married shortly thereafter. Sonia finds it hard to believe she has been divorced, but attributes the difficulties with her first marriage to the moratorium on her development as well as the tremendous growth she experienced as a person between the ages of 21 and 25. She continues to believe that this period of development for a woman is critically important and incorporates some of her life lessons into her own clinical work. Recently, Sonia celebrated her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Since graduating, she has had three different professional positions. She worked at a guidance center for her postdoctoral year and then worked in the schools as a Licensed Specialist in School Psychology (LSSP) for one year. Now, Sonia is working as the clinical director of a nonprofit agency. She indicated that she loves her job and is very proud of her accomplishments thus far.

*Samantha.* After teaching for a non-profit organization for two years, Samantha felt a call to go back to school. Her teaching experience caused her to develop strong feelings about what was going on in the classroom. She wanted to have an impact on the classroom and knew she needed more education to do so. Because of her passion to contribute to schools, she chose a program in school psychology. The next four years were fueled by her passion to learn and get involved with the schools. She found her passion for therapy along the way and cultivated this skill throughout training. She ultimately decided on a school-based internship to complete her training and continue to use her clinical skills in the schools

In Samantha's personal life, she has always been focused and very conscientious of the needs of others. Always putting others above herself, psychology has always been a good fit. In more recent times, Samantha has had to work on creating boundaries within her personal life because she often "doesn't have anything more to give" after a full day of counseling. She married right after

graduate school and is now helping to put her husband through graduate school. When looking for positions after graduate school, Samantha wanted a different experience than working in the schools. She decided to work in a private practice realizing this was one area that she had not been exposed to during training or internship. She enjoys the work, but is working with severe abuse cases, which causes emotional drain for Samantha. Wanting to have children in the near future, Samantha isn't sure how long she can stay in this position- but is thankful for the opportunity to learn so much.

*Tanya.* Growing up with dreams of becoming a teacher, Tanya entered graduate school with her sights set on working with children. She decided on a clinical developmental program to gain experience with clinical work as well as to understand children's development more thoroughly. The program that she decided to attend was in the Midwest, a culture shock from her home state of Texas, where she had been born and raised. She and her boyfriend moved to the Midwest with nothing more than a U-haul trailer and a pick-up truck. Not having a lot of money was a transition that Tanya had to make that bothered her throughout the graduate school experience.

While Tanya wanted to work with children, she felt that her experiences with children were never quite what she thought they would be. After a string of difficult experiences with parents of child clients, she felt "frustrated" by her

work with children and felt that she was not cut out to work with children. Tanya decided to shift her professional interests to working with young adults. Her desire to work with young adults, particularly college students, was a great experience. She reported that working with this population allowed her to use her clinical skills without having to deal with parents and the “extras” of work with children that caused her significant stress and distress throughout her clinical training experiences. She graduated with her Ph.D. in 2001.

Tanya is now in her early thirties and works at a college counseling center. She has been working in this position for the past two years and reportedly enjoys it. Tanya married shortly after graduate school. Another recent change in her personal life was the birth of her daughter last year. Following this event, she felt that her “priorities shifted.” Family now comes first, as she reports that if it “weren’t for my mom taking care of my daughter’ she would not be working at all. Work is a stress relief for Tanya and although she feels guilty about working on some days, on most days she loves her job.

#### *Data Sources and Collection Procedures*

After talking with training directors in the greater Austin and Dallas areas to identify potential participants, a letter was distributed consisting of an overview of the study, information about the requirements for participation, and an invitation to call for more information and to arrange a time for the interview (see

Appendix A). During the phone call, further details were given regarding the research project, and additional questions were answered. Once the participant agreed to meet for the initial interview, the time and place for the interview was arranged. All appointments were held in participants' offices or in mutually agreed upon locations in Austin or the Dallas Metroplex. When meeting with participants in public, privacy and confidentiality were ensured by choosing locations that were removed from other people in the establishment and by choosing times that were generally less crowded, such as meeting in the late afternoon. Upon arrival, participants were provided with a consent form describing the nature and purpose of the study, as well as ensuring confidentiality of the information shared with the primary investigator (see Appendix B). Following introductions and necessary paperwork, such as signatures on the consent forms, participants began to share their story. The initial interviews were conducted with each participant and lasted for approximately one and a half to two hours. Upon completion of the initial interviews with the entire group, follow-up interviews were scheduled and conducted.

All interviews were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed to prepare for analysis by the primary investigator. Any taped notes added to the end of an interview were also transcribed and used for analysis purposes.

## *Interviews*

*Rationale for interviews.* Unstructured interviews are often used in grounded theory studies to learn how participants interpret particular aspects of their lives and experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The goal of unstructured interviews is to understand the participants' way of life through their eyes, using their own words (Josselson, 1987). All interviews began with general questions, moving to more specific areas as the interview progressed and as the participant led the interview. This was done to ensure that the participant was in charge of guiding the content and pace of their interview.

*Interview guide.* An Interview Guide was developed for this project (see Appendix C). This guide served as a starting point for the interviews, ensuring that theoretically interesting areas were explored. The stories of my participants began with a simple request for them to think back and describe what brought them into the field. The story continued with the participant creating a mental time line of his or her development during graduate school and the primary influences, events, and people that affected personal and professional development throughout this process. In each interview, the participant told his or her own story as it unfolded in his or her mind. While no two interviews were completely alike, each interview covered the major points and guidelines of the interview guide. The interview guide served to provide a structured way to

inquire about the sequence of events and training experiences. This provided a framework to chronologically sequence events and provided follow-up questions at times that participants became absorbed in various aspects of their story. I found that each of my participants discussed these topics in his or her own unique way, bringing in other topics of personal significance that went far beyond the guiding questions and allowed an oral storytelling of his or her own personal process and development.

Each of the two interviews ended with a question that asked the participant to reflect on the recollection process and describe what it was like to talk about development and personal experiences throughout the interview. This question served to lead into a time of decompressing from the interview, which included small talk with the investigator and scheduling the second interview, when appropriate.

*Follow-up interviews.* Second interviews were conducted with all participants- and were important for member checking purposes, a means to establish credibility in qualitative research, and to examine the credibility of the emerging phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Another goal of the second interviews was to provide an opportunity for the researcher to ask participants follow-up questions to information obtained during the first interview. For most participants, the first interviews consisted of their decision to enter graduate

school and focused on the graduate school experience, including internship. Thus, the second interviews consisted of the continued story of the postdoctoral year along with graduation, and current professional endeavors. At the onset of the second interviews, the first fifteen minutes were spent verifying interpretations of the data with the participants to ensure their intended meanings as well as credibility and accuracy. The remaining hour was left to continue the story from the initial interviews and to allow for continued data collection.

#### *The Analysis Process*

Before beginning the formal analysis process, copious field notes were taken to ensure that the researcher was chronicling the musings of her thoughts and the raw impressions collected from the interviews. Following the completion of each individual interview, the audiotapes were sent to a transcriber. Upon receipt of the transcripts, each tape was checked to ensure the thoroughness of the data transcript and to make changes, if necessary, reading through the transcript and listening to the tape simultaneously. This exercise allowed the researcher to become more familiar with the data, and consequently facilitated with later identification of categories. The following discussion will address the methods to be used in coding and analyzing the data.

## *Coding*

The next step in the process of data analysis involved coding. Coding has been defined as the “operations by which data are broken down, conceptualized, and put back together in new ways” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 57). It is important to clarify that the processes of data collection and data analysis are tightly interwoven, such that both processes, at times, are occurring in an overlapping manner. This overlapping method has been described in the literature as a “constant comparative method,” because the researcher is able to make comparisons and continually ask questions of the data throughout the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Because this process is overlapping, rather than sequential, this comparison will ensue until the researcher arrives at a point of *theoretical saturation*. This term refers to several important issues that need to be considered, assuring that: 1) no new or relevant categories emerge from the data; 2) the dimensions of the categories have been exhausted; and 3) the relationships between categories are well established. This ensures that critical issues and events are accounted for during data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). Grounded theory analysis is comprised of three major types of coding, or categorization, of data: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). The current investigation employed a combination of

qualitative research methodologies, relying predominantly on grounded theory methodology, with each type of coding that was used described below.

*Open coding.* According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), by closely examining the transcribed data, the researcher is able to begin naming concepts within the data set. This naming process is referred to as open coding. Open coding occurred at the initial phase of analysis. Once initial concepts were named, the process of categorization began. This allowed for preliminary grouping of concepts to occur according to particular phenomena that have been identified in the data. Conceptualizing the data was the first important step in data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998).

*Axial coding.* During this stage of analysis, the focus was on specifying the phenomenon in terms of the context in which it is embedded. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998), this specification process involves a set of procedures that recombines the data in new and different ways. This process was a means of making connections between the categories that were previously identified during open coding, organized around the central phenomena within the data.

*Selective coding.* Selective coding, also referred to as integration, marks the last phase in the data analysis process. Integration does not differ greatly from axial coding; however, it is done at a more abstract level of analysis. Once axial

coding is conducted, the core category should be well developed in its description and relationships to other categories. At this stage of analysis, the researcher found a unique way, using much thought and experimentation, to organize the categories and volumes of information around the central phenomenon that has been initially identified during the open coding phase, and further focused during the axial coding phase. All of the other previously identified categories are organized around this central phenomenon. In grounded theory, subcategories are linked to the core category using the paradigm model.

#### *Theory Development*

This process was pivotal to data collection process and analysis, and resulted in a grounded theory that integrated the emerging categories from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). As this theory began to emerge, exact words and statements from the participants were used to illustrate the categories and their associated relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998) refer to this step as creating the *story line*, an opportunity to describe the central phenomenon analytically. Using the story line as a guide, the participants were examined case by case to ensure that they fit with the developing story. If some cases did not fit the story line, the theory was reorganized or further specified so that it accounts for the totality of information collected from the participants. Data from the interviews were never “forced”

into preconceived categories to fit with the emerging story. Any concepts that came to be included in the final story must “earn their way in” (Glaser, 1990). The outcome of this analysis is a theory explaining the process under study, based on the patterns of social processes and relationships that arise directly from the words of those who have experienced it. The following chapters will explore the theory that emerged – the construction of professional identity and the primary tenets of this theory.

### *The Researcher in Naturalistic Inquiry*

#### *Issues Related To Trustworthiness*

The nature of qualitative inquiry required that the primary investigator become an important instrument in the research process. Because the researcher is an integral part of this process, the professional and personal life experiences that I bring to the research can influence the product of the study in important ways (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). When the researcher becomes aware of his or her own professional and personal life experiences, this awareness can serve to facilitate positive contributions to the research process. However, it is important to prevent the researcher from unknowingly biasing the results because of previous experiences. Several evaluative criteria have been developed to prevent researcher bias from occurring as well as establish trustworthiness of qualitative research studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Evaluative

criteria ensure quality and rigor in the qualitative research process and provide controls to inform the collection of data and ongoing analysis. Such criteria differ from the conventional tools of reliability and validity that have been traditionally used throughout the course of the last century by positivist researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The conventional tools of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity of the data, are referred to in the qualitative research world as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the data, respectively (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). There are many different ways to achieve trustworthiness using these evaluative criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following discussion will focus on the criteria that seem most appropriate given the focus of current research efforts.

### *Establishing Credibility*

The concept of credibility is the naturalist's substitute for the conventional concept of internal validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is important that the researcher carry out the study in such a way that the probability of enhancing credible findings is optimal. Given that the goal of data analysis is to stay true to the intended meaning of the participants, it is not only necessary to understand the language of the participants, but to embrace the complexities that exist within their conversations (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Janesick, 1998). Member checking

is one way to ensure that the researcher understands the language of the participants and that the credibility of the research findings is maintained.

*Member checking.* Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to member checking as the “most crucial technique for establishing credibility.” Member checks are opportunities for the researcher to meet with participants and inquire about the accuracy of the information that has been collected during the interviews, as well as to “check out” the researcher’s emerging interpretations and evolving conceptualizations. For the purpose of the current study, member checks consisted of second interviews with all participants following the completion of initial interviews with each participant. During the first portion of the second interviews, I discussed relevant thematic content from the first interview with each participant. This gave the participants an immediate opportunity to provide feedback, including correcting errors and challenging any information that could have been misinterpreted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This interaction provided an opportunity for the participant to volunteer additional information that was not mentioned in the initial interview and often launched us into the second interview. This information served to be very useful and contributed to the evolving conceptualization of the phenomenon of interest. The overarching goal of this member checking was to ensure that my interpretations were consistent with the participants’ intended meaning.

*Peer debriefing.* This technique is also useful in establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing allows the researcher to establish a collaborative relationship with a colleague who is familiar with the phenomenon of interest and methodological issues involved with qualitative research. During the research process, I met with another colleague who was also conducting a qualitative study to engage in peer debriefing. We met on a regular basis to discuss, explore, and constructively criticize the developing model. The purpose of this collegial relationship served three functions: 1) keeping me “honest” to use the input from the debriefing to explore different meanings and clarify interpretations; 2) affording me the opportunity to develop and test working hypotheses with my fellow colleague; and 3) providing me with a cathartic opportunity to clear my mind and express my frustrations that may have been clouding good judgment or preventing the analysis from moving forward (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I kept a running tablet of our meetings together and have often looked back at these to track the development of my working hypotheses and questions that arose throughout those meetings.

### *Transferability*

The concept of transferability is equivalent to the conventional concept of external validity, or generalizability, proposed by positive research methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This criterion of trustworthiness is concerned with the

applicability of the results beyond the sample of individuals who participated in the study. Interviewing participants who have a range of experiences and conceptualizations allows for the findings to be utilized in contexts extending beyond the context of the interviews. “Thick descriptions” of each participant were compiled, including comprehensive profiles of the contextual and individual factors relevant to each participant (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Because the current study used theoretical sampling, a range of detailed profiles emerged that will make it possible for psychologists to discuss this data and make generalizations to their own professional experiences.

#### *Dependability and Confirmability*

The concept of dependability, which refers to the consistency of the research findings, parallels the conventional tool of reliability that is a hallmark requirement for positivist research efforts. Credibility cannot be established without dependability (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In order to enhance the dependability of the results from the current research efforts, I kept detailed data collection and analysis notes to inform both the process and the product that emerged from the data. The data collection procedures also contributed to ensuring the confirmability of research findings, which refers to the objectivity or neutrality of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin 1990). Because the qualitative researcher realizes that the principle of objectivity in

research is nonexistent, I had to pose questions to the data, such as: Are the current findings the product of the focus of the inquiry or the biases of the researcher? To what extent is the emerging model driven by the data? Acknowledging possible research biases throughout data collection and analysis served to provide findings that can be logically and systematically tracked to their data sources. An “audit trail” was established using note-taking and record keeping. This “trail” provides a residue of records, including: 1) the raw data, such as the audio-tapes, written field notes; 2) analysis products, such as write-ups of field notes, summaries of condensed notes, and working hypotheses; 3) synthesis products, such as the structure of categories (e.g., themes and definitions), findings and conclusions; 4) process notes; 5) materials relating to intentions, such as personal notes and expectations for the project; and 6) instrument development information, including preliminary interview schedules and interview guides. Records were kept for each individual and organized by participant. This audit trail has provided valuable information and support for the dependability as well as the confirmability of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

#### *Researcher Biases*

My interest in this topic comes from my own ongoing experiences and journey as a developing psychologist practicing psychotherapy with children,

adolescents, and families. Because of my own personal and professional development throughout this process, I was, and continue to be fascinated with understanding others' professional development and how they have come to an understanding of their own development. Because of the fact that this experience is ongoing for me, I was attentive to the issues that psychologists faced and was able to empathize with the participants in the study. I realize that my prolonged engagement with the culture of graduate school resulted in my focus on the graduate school experience for much of the first interview, more so than if I had not had this prolonged engagement. However, I felt that spending this much time during the first interview gave me firsthand account of how these individuals approached graduate school, which served to bear tremendous relevance on their decision-making processes in the years to come.

For the last year, I have reflected on several thoughts about the process I have studied, including my own professional identity construction thus far. This experience has allowed me to understand myself and my own developmental process as well as the construction of professional identity. In light of the fact that I have not experienced the transition from professional training to professional myself, I am sensitive to the reality that topics arose that I had not anticipated. I do not claim to know the totality of the components of this developmental process, nor do I posit to know how it works. In talking this

position, I continued to make myself available to information that was consistent with my knowledge of this area and begin to understand the new and unique information that came from different perspectives.

While this model represents a sliver of the totality of professional identity construction, by no means is it the whole picture. I believe that each person is on a unique journey, both personally and professionally. Because of my bias that these two processes cannot be separated, I continually asked questions that addressed both areas of one's life. It was interesting to me that some participants were eager to share information about their personal life while others were very reserved. I often found myself wondering whether the individual did have a strong sense of who he or she was? I quickly realized that I had to guard against making judgments about participants who were not ready to share extensive information about themselves- reminding myself that we had just met and this was a new experience for the participant and for me. By the end of the second interview, each person shared what they were comfortable sharing and I walked away from every interview feeling privileged that I had the opportunity to meet with each person.

As a Christian woman, I also believe that each person is on a spiritual journey that impacts his or her developmental process. Some participants talked about the influence of spirituality while for others this was not a topic that came

up. Although I am biased that this is an important part of development, I tried not to impose my bias on the participants. I felt I did not force discussions related to spiritual practice- simply following up on questions when a participant brought spirituality into conversations. Because I was in a position of “wanting to know more” I was able to learn more about the development and decision-making process for early career psychologists and was extremely blessed for the opportunity to discuss this professional journey with others.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS AND INTEGRATION

The outcome of the current research endeavor is a theoretical model that illustrates a process experienced by early career psychologists as they transition from student to professional. After successfully proposing this study and moving into the data collection phase, I did not fathom how fascinated I would be with conducting this investigation and what an important part of my life it would become. The interviews were an amazing experience, marked by rich information and detail beyond my expectations. Consistently, I found that each participant approached the process with genuine interest and a desire to share his or her life with me. As I studied and analyzed the data, I came to the realization that there was no easy way to conceptualize the voluminous amount of data that had been generated as a result of this qualitative investigation. Early on, it was a trying experience to begin to see any coherency within the data. Needless to say, it was not immediately evident what theme, if any, could serve to pull together the breadth and depth of the experiences I had witnessed. I contemplated and worked extensively to develop many different themes and stories that exist within the data set. I often found myself toiling over which story seemed to best represent the

information that I had obtained while at the same time pay earnest tribute to the sentiments of my participants.

Upon extensive and exhaustive review of the data, this process is best described as the construction of professional identity. Within this construction, there are several phases, processes, and component parts that are involved. All of these entities are necessary in the compilation process to result in professional identity construction. As my father is an architect, I was drawn towards using the metaphor of building a home to provide the visual “framework” for understanding the current research efforts as well as to give a mental picture of how this active construction process occurs. As a new home is constructed from the ground up, so is the professional identity of a psychologist.

This metaphor serves to help the reader understand the process that was uncovered. A brief description of the building metaphor and the analogous relationship to professional identity construction is addressed here. This is followed by a brief description of the phases that were found to occur within professional identity construction, with the focus of attention on the “customizing phase” of professional identity that occurs for the early-career psychologist. A visual diagram of “customizing” is given to illustrate this process in pictorial form. Following the diagram there is a detailed discussion of the core components of customization and the relationships that exist within the

customization phase. Woven throughout the description of the process of customization are quotations from the participants in my study. Such quotations serve to keep the model grounded in the data as well as illustrate the breadth of experiences and views of participants who have gone through this unique developmental process. Pseudonyms of the participants have been used for identification purposes to facilitate the discussion of the results within these chapters. The end of the results chapter is dedicated to walking through the lives of two participants during the customization phase to obtain a holistic view of their unique experience throughout this time of professional identity construction.

### Breaking Ground

The metaphor of building a home fits nicely with my theoretical model of constructing one's professional identity. Take a moment to think about how a custom home is constructed. In setting out to build a house, it is not built overnight, except on a reality television series in this day and age. In talking with my father, I began to understand the different steps that occur in the building process. In fact, the process actually begins with making the decision to build a house. This may sound trite, but in fact, this is a critical decision as it symbolizes a commitment to the process that follows.

For individuals who commit to building a house, the journey has just begun. The next step that occurs is the development of the plans, or blueprints.

Blueprints allow for the house to be constructed in a fashion that ensures it is “up to code,” that all the necessary regulations have been followed and that the emerging blueprint is developed in such a way that the house is structurally sound, suitable to withstand the test of time. At this point, construction commences. Once ground is broken, the foundation is laid and framing can begin. Framing ensures there is a structure in place that provides adequate support and reinforcement for the house. The framing phase is both important and exciting as it creates the skeleton for the house that will last for years to come. What follows is customization, a time in which the unique features of the house are added. For the first time during construction, unique features are added to the “house in progress” that allow for the house to look different from the rest. This phase of construction is labor intensive, requiring a great deal of time and attention to detail. The customizing phase ultimately results in a house that is distinguishable, unique, and set apart from the rest. For the purpose of this study, customization is crucial and will be the main focus of the current investigation. Although there are phases in home construction that follow customization, such as the finishing phase, and lastly, moving in to the “home,” these are not germane for the purpose of the current discussion and are thus acknowledged but not explored.

Likening the construction process to the building of one's professional identity, there are different phases of professional identity construction. The commitment to the process of building one's professional identity of early-career psychologists begins with the decision to enter graduate school. This decision solidifies the area in which the individual is going to build his or her house. In this case, the areas included clinical psychology, school psychology, or counseling psychology. Interestingly, although the individual makes the commitment to enter graduate school, there remains a great deal of uncertainty about the process that unfolds. Sonia describes the following:

I drove out here in my little Nissan Stanza with my pet iguana and all my crap in my car and I drove out here and I stepped out knowing no one....I didn't realize what I was really kind of getting myself into...what was I thinking coming here at such a young age!

Others, like Denise and Tanya, were ready to enter graduate school, but their ideas about what they wanted to do in graduate school remained tentative. Denise recalled that as she was working in a community mental health agency as a licensed counselor she felt like "I needed more information than what I had. Felt like I need to get a Ph.D. and I decided to go the psychology route because I wanted to work with children." Still others, like Bill and Martha, felt that

graduate school was the next step without really knowing what lay ahead. In the words of Bill,

I was living in the islands as a musician and feeling more and more like I was wasting away in Margaritaville, like the Jimmy Buffet song. I started feeling like I needed to move forward. So, I came back to the states and tried to figure out what field to go in between social work, counseling, and psychology. I went psychology.

Alex, wanting to incorporate his spirituality into graduate training chose a program that was affiliated with his Mormon spiritual beliefs. Alex felt that “psychology can kind of be out there sometimes. And so I wanted a place that would also help me connect some of my spiritual beliefs with some of the ideas in psychology.”

Although each person comes to enter graduate school by a different path, upon entering graduate programs, everyone was exposed to the universal “blueprint” of graduate school. One’s graduate school experience can be likened to the time in construction when blueprints are developed. The “blueprint” of graduate school provides the parameters and guidelines that begin the construction of the professional identity of a psychologist. Differing from the emerging blueprint of a custom house that is often co-constructed with the future owners, the blueprint of graduate school has been constructed long before the

student enters graduate training. While there are varying degrees of flexibility, for the most part, the student becomes highly invested in coming to an understanding and identification with the “blueprint” of graduate school throughout their years of study. Martha viewed graduate school as giving her

theoretical and intellectual underpinnings for what I had already figured out just based on life... I would read about things and say—“So that’s why David used to do that,” or “That’s what they call that thing that Christie used to always do.”

For Alex, graduate school was “more of a means to an end...that if I want to work with some freedom, with some autonomy with people, then I really need this degree to do it...it was more of a practical thing.”

While understanding and identifying the “blueprint” of graduate school was enjoyable for some, others felt that they were playing a “game” of sorts, a game that they were forced to play. Alex felt that the graduate school experience left him feeling,

discouraged and disillusioned- thinking, “How can all these people be buying into all this crap?” The frustration is more of...its almost like you had to play the game in order to keep moving on...that’s what was frustrating and discouraging.

The frustration appeared to have been eased by clinical experiences that kept the focus on constructing professional identity.

Breaking ground in the construction of professional identity occurs when the student begins to put the blueprint in action by actively participating in didactic coursework in order to lay a solid foundation upon which to place subsequent professional experiences. Once this foundation is “cemented,” experiences with clients, supervision, and professional settings are all ways that the individual begins to strengthen the underlying foundation upon which his or her professional identity is constructed.

The framing phase is the time that the individual is leaning on professionals with more skill, such as supervisors, professors, and people who have been working in the field, to inform his or her development and to help anchor the foundation that has been obtained through didactic experiences. Sonia credited “God placing the right people in her life at the right time” to help guide her through graduate school. Denise felt:

Scared to death because everything you did was videotaped and they were either videotaping it so that you could spill your guts about it in class later or they were all watching through a one-way mirror and critiquing you the whole time...It was truly a growth experience.

During framing, students are engaged in a plethora of training experiences, culminating in the rigorous internship year. Practicum experiences, related work experiences, and internship all fall under the framing phase of professional identity construction. During framing, the student is learning from others who are helping build the frame of professional identity. Maximal benefits of framing occur when the student is actively engaged in the construction process. This is truly an intense working phase, and often leaves the individual feeling exhausted. Some choose to place other demands of life on hold in order to focus on finishing the framing phase. Denise describes her personal life during this time: “Personal life? I don’t remember having one. I think we all just... I can’t speak for everybody... but I think we just kind of put our personal lives on hold.. It was virtually nonexistent.” Michael describes his personal life as a “pretty boring personal life. Really wasn’t. Just went to school. Maybe went on one date, if you could call it that.”

The culmination of framing is graduating with the doctorate. After graduation, customization can now begin. This was a unique experience for each person I interviewed. Just as no two custom homes look completely alike, neither do the careers of two recently licensed psychologists. From making decisions to pursue different post-doctoral experiences, to finding positions after becoming licensed, such choices serve to inform customization. These early decisions are

the beginning of “customizing” one’s career. For the first time, the emerging professional is able to make independent decisions informed by a myriad of different factors. The customization phase is the most salient for the purposes of the current study, as it is the time when several decisions are being made, and the personalization of one’s career begins. This serves to launch our discussion of the current theoretical model that emerged out of this phase of professional identity construction.

#### How Customization Came Into Being

The above discussion illustrates the precipitous development that is occurring for the emerging professional at a holistic level. Before moving into the specifics of customization, a description of the evolution of the process model is necessary. As I looked within the categories that had emerged from the data, I took a closer look at the time in life following graduate school, the time in life that had been termed the “exploratory stage,” in accordance with the existing literature base (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). While several studies have examined the “evolution of the professional self,” little attention has been given to the specifics of decision-making for the early career psychologist (Fouad, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; 2003). Given that I discussed with each participant their personal and professional journey and the factors that influenced development, I was able to take my data analysis to the next level and examine

the personal and professional factors affecting decision-making during the “exploratory stage.”

As the analysis continued, I found that each participant talked about the decisions he or she made during the shift from student to professional, and the factors that were being considered while making these decisions. As the participants were faced with these decisions they considered personal and professional issues in a variety of ways. Denise described this transitional time as “contemplative” and a time of new beginnings: “I knew that this was not going to be just a one year thing. My husband and I weren’t looking for a one year post-doc, I was looking at starting a new career.” Tanya described this time in life as tiring:

I had mostly wrapped things up.... So I would finish training here and go finish up there. So it was tiring, really tiring...in retrospect, I would have never done that again. I don’t know how I could change it but it would have been better to have some time off because I was already drained.

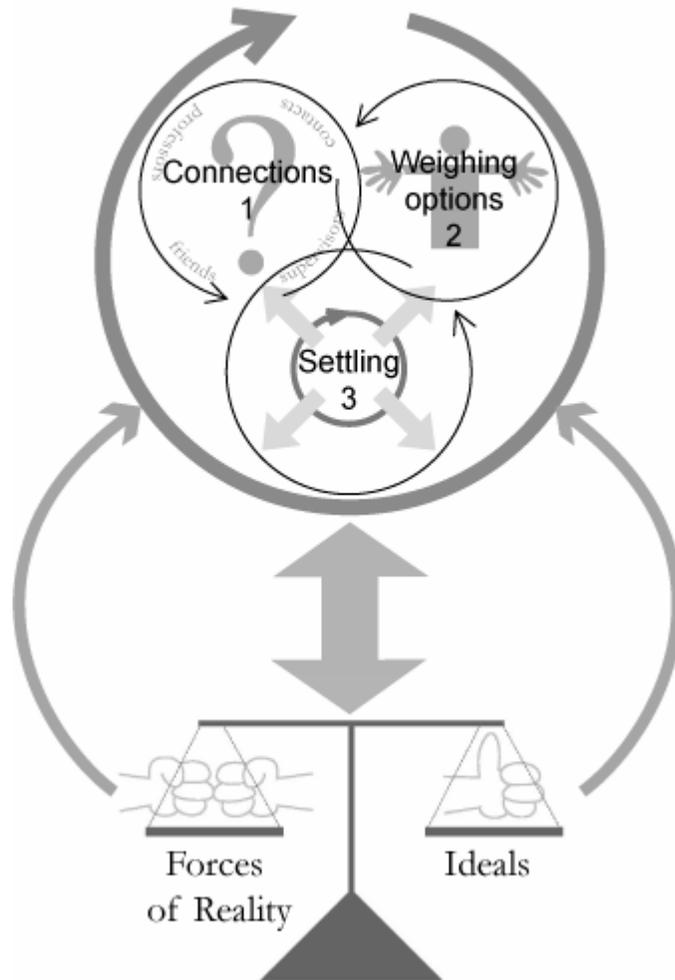
Nancy described the difficulty of deciding upon a job that would meet the needs of her family while at the same time challenge her professionally. Alex felt good that graduate school was done, but frustrated “because you can’t do anything. If you have a Ph.D....you can’t do a thing with it if you’re not licensed, nothing!” After reading and re-reading, it became obvious to me that this decision-making

process was more than just “necessary to get a j-o-b,” it was a critical time for all the participants in shaping and molding the course of their emerging professional life. For all participants, it was a time of deciding and dealing with the direction of their careers as well as the demands of reality.

### Customizing Professional Identity- Model of a Dynamic Decision-Making Process

After graduate school, the budding professional enters the context of the job market and a new realm of having to make critical decisions with lasting ramifications. The core concept for the model of customizing professional identity is the process by which forces of reality and professional ideals inform decision-making. Such decisions require a great deal of time, effort, and focus to carefully consider the various options that exist and the possible consequences of each decision. Figure 1 presents a visual representation of the model that has emerged as a result of the current research efforts.

Figure 4.1  
Decision-making Process of Customization



In the description that follows, underlined words and phrases correspond to the labeled parts of the model in Figure 4.1. As this model pertains to early career psychologists, each participant is situated within the context of his or her professional career. Within this context, new professionals attend to forces of

reality and ideals as they begin making professional career decisions during customization. Forces of reality exist outside of the individual and have a significant impact on customization. These forces can be divided into four subcategories including romantic relationships, family, finances, and health issues. An individual's ideals also play a significant role during customization. Ideals exist inside of the individual. Questions such as; What interests me?; Who am I?; "Where do I want to go?" serve to inform the shaping of ideals. Such questions have been cited in the literature as serving to shape the "internal focus" of the novice professional (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). For the purpose of the current study, three components of ideals were found to have critical implications: personal and professional interests, characteristics of the self, and goals.

In a myriad of ways the forces of reality and ideals serve to influence and intervene in the decision-making process of the psychologist. This decision-making process is comprised of three different and distinct action processes: connections; weighing the options, and settling. First, the emerging professional creates options through connections that have been cultivated over the years through the experiences of graduate training including the internship experience. Next, the professional must weigh the options by considering the forces of reality and ideals, comparing the two and asking at a conscious level, "Is this an option that is feasible for me?" At a subconscious level, the question becomes, "Will this

be an option that will help construct my professional identity?” After weighing the options, there is a settling on an option(s) that occurs. Settling can be defined as an active process whereby an individual selects a professional position while attempting to balance the forces of reality and ideals. Settling also refers to the precipitous, ongoing transition within the profession of psychology. Many factors can facilitate or hinder the customization process including feelings about decisions and perceptions of balance.

Customizing is a complex process. It does not occur in a sequential series of stages unto completion. It is, rather, a cyclical process that will be visited and revisited frequently. Just as each human being is unique, also no two individuals go through the customization process in exactly the same way. This process is a dynamic one, namely, because forces of reality change over time, as they exist outside of the individual, as well as the fact that this decision-making process is continuously informed and influenced by forces of reality and ideals.

While this model focuses specifically on the customizing phase of professional identity construction for the eleven participants in this study, it is important to understand that each participant is situated within a larger cultural and social context. Consistent with the existing literature, individuals are constructing their career in a particular social ecology (Savickas, 2002). This context has multiple facets including one’s life before graduate school, the

decision to enter graduate school, and the graduate school experience.

Participants' cultural background, family of origin, and gender also comprise the context in which this customizing process is situated.

The following sections of this chapter serve to explore the model of decision-making during customization in Figure 4.1, with hopes of providing a better understanding of decision-making during customization and the factors that affect this process. Gaining an appreciation for the details of this model allows the reader to conceptualize this process and understand how this process can be navigated differently depending on the individual.

### *Ideals*

Ideals are best described as the individual's internal working model of professional identity. As early career psychologists are new to the profession of psychology, their internal working model is largely under construction. During this construction, the individual is contemplating the many facets of the profession as he or she begins to plot the course of his or her career and gives due consideration to conceptions about how he or she would like to practice psychology. These conceptions shape professional ideals, which intervene and affect the customization process.

While the term conception is often used in conjunction with "self-conception," referring to beliefs about the self, the current study adopted a

broader definition of conception. Thus, the properties of conceptions include beliefs about self as well as interests, abilities, passions, dreams, goals, and action-steps to actualize ideals. These “ideal” conceptions form the basis of the internal working model of professional identity. This model is very much a work in progress, namely by nature of the fact that this process is ongoing, informed, and shaped by exposure to a myriad of factors including, but not limited to, education, experience, personality, and spirituality.

The intense training focus of graduate school can be seen as a time in one’s life that is perpetually driven by ideals, which serve to shape and mold the student. Professional experiences during graduate school include supervision, client encounters, and exposure to different professional settings, as well as professional experiences after graduate school. These are largely responsible for the shaping of ideals and consequently, one’s internal working model of professional identity. After graduate school, the emerging professional gains distance from the intensive experience of graduate school and begins to contemplate, expand, and refine conceptions of ideals.

Analysis of the data found that ideals are broken down into three categories that serve to illustrate the sentiments of the participants. These include professional and personal interests, characteristics of self, and goals. Figure 4.2 provides a pictorial representation of how these components come together.

Figure 4.2  
Ideals



#### *Personal and Professional Interests*

Personal and professional interests were found to be key conceptions informing ideals. Personal interests refer to interests originating from one's own life that contribute to the shaping of professional self-conceptions, while professional interests are the things that one enjoys within the field of psychology as well as one's perception of his or her own abilities and interests in clinical work. While professional interests play a key role in the shaping of ideals as they steer the individual in considering professional opportunities that are commensurate with such interests, personal interests serve to steer the individual to consider professional opportunities that meet personal needs. Both interests

can be seen as being guided by questions such as, “What interests me?” “What am I passionate about?” “What do I enjoy doing?” Martha recalls:

I never really ever considered myself to be an academician; I never really thought I was going to go in that direction. It doesn't bring passion out in me, I think it is interesting stuff but I tend to follow my passion. If I'm not passionate about something, I probably won't do it.

Personal interests were key for individuals with families, particularly families with young children or children with special needs. Although Alex, Nancy, and Martha had well-conceived professional interests, their personal interests took precedence over professional interests and ultimately, served to shape their professional decisions. For Alex, “that family is important is a given for me.” His recollection of the time he finished internship included feeling that he wasn't sure where he was going to end up in life:

But I didn't see myself moving and moving again so.... You know, with two small kids...three small kids by that time. You know, I wasn't going to start moving and moving again... financially it didn't make sense. You can't do that. And I liked it here... I was focused on my family.

Fox, Denise, Michael, Samantha, and Sonia reported that professional interests played a key role in the shaping of ideals. Professional interests are largely shaped by experiences in the field, particularly clinical work, as one

develops as a professional psychologist. For several participants, clinical work with children was a salient professional interest. Fox recalls that his impetus for working with youth was birthed in the fact that he “felt like a teen.” Throughout his professional training experiences, as Fox worked with teenagers, he also became interested in working with younger children and pursued work in contexts that allowed him to work with this population.

Michael’s professional interests have always revolved around work with children. Having taught for 11 years, he pursued experiences in graduate school that allowed him to work with children and do the things that he has always enjoyed doing, like “talking about cartoons” because he still watched cartoons, as well as playing puppets and board games. Sonia’s professional interest to work with children was not apparent when she entered graduate school. Reporting that she does not usually consider herself a “kid’s kind of person,” and actually found “kids kind of irritating,” she came to enjoy working with children professionally. Her training experiences during graduate school and the post-doctoral residency, particularly feedback received from supervisors regarding her work with children caused her professional interests to be steered in a child-focused direction.

Sonia’s life illustrates that there are times when personal interests can be different than professional interests with regards to the same issue, in this case, work with children. Another example of different personal and professional interests comes

from the life of Tanya. Tanya entered graduate school with a passion and personal interest to work with children. As her mother was a teacher, she grew up around children and believed she would always work kids. Thus, throughout her graduate training she pursued clinical experiences with children. After a series of difficult experiences working with parents of child clients during her graduate training years, Tanya's professional interests shifted from working with children to working with adults. Professionally, Martha was interested and drawn to working with children and working with the poor, indicating that working with the poor fueled her passion for psychology.

I'm not nearly as drawn to people who have a lot of resources...I feel much more compassion for people who have struggled above and beyond personal struggles. People who don't have education. People who don't have the money. People who run into lots of racial and ethnic barriers. People who have lived through traumas. Those people draw me a lot more than people who have everything done for them, and have personal issue on top of that. Not that I don't feel compassion for my private practice clients, but I don't feel the same kind of drive. I actually feel a calling to work with the poor and the underserved.

### *Characteristics of the Self*

Characteristics of the self are qualities that distinguish an individual uniquely from others. Such self-characteristics may include one's personality, personal strengths and weaknesses, and an understanding of one's character. Self characteristics are perpetually driven by the question "Who am I?" The rigor of graduate training and related experiences serves to shape self characteristics as well as the personal life of the individual outside the context of graduate school. The shaping of self characteristics during graduate school was particularly salient for participants who entered graduate school in their early twenties, coming into graduate school straight out of undergraduate degree programs. "Being green" was a term used by some participants who were "twenty something" when they entered graduate school. "Being green" can be described as a sense of naiveté, as feeling young and immature, as well as being overzealous to the tasks of graduate school, giving 120% and feeling like one had the ability to create change.

The following quotation illustrates "greenness" in the words of Samantha:

I felt very excited about what I wanted to do, very empowered with the belief that I could create change. Having taught with XXX, working with that kind of organization- there's a lot of energy, there's a lot of thinking that you're not just one person and you can do anything you want in the world. Graduate school is a little different. It doesn't have that sort of

“rah-rah support” and really the passion that I had from the earlier experiences. Graduate school is a very different experience.

After exposure to therapy, Amanda found one thing she learned about herself was that “therapy is not what I would want to do all day, every day.” As her father is a Jungian analyst, this was initially a difficult transition. Personality-wise, she felt better suited for assessment and short-term therapy, rather than long-term therapy. For Amanda, Bill, and Fox, they saw themselves as “always wanting to do some therapy as part of my practice, but wouldn’t want to be a therapist full time.” Michael has always seen himself as a “numbers guy,” with psychological assessment being a natural fit for him, as he sees himself connecting with the “whole actuarial nature of assessment...not quite so much touchy-feely.” Michael indicated that the structure of assessment “lended more towards my personality, towards my work personality,” reporting that “I’m probably more like a counselor in my real life.... maybe that’s why I don’t want to do it in my professional life.” Michael’s response leads one to think about whether or not personal and professional self-characteristics can differ. Denise has always seen herself as “more than a school psychologist.” She describes having a passion for counseling that was developed after friends motivated her to enter graduate school because she was always a “good listener.” Although she

likes assessment and it is something she does quite a bit of, her primary focus is therapy.

To know oneself is to question self throughout the life cycle. Tanya on many occasions would ask herself, “Can I really do this? Is this what I really want to do?” She recalls that this self-reflective exercise helped her in times of stress and kept her attune to her feelings and experiences throughout the process. After Bill divorced, he also found himself questioning- questioning who he was. During this time, he focused solely on psychological assessment, namely because it was something he knew and felt very comfortable doing, and he did not feel like he was ready to do any therapy at that time.

Bill’s own personal therapy was a conduit allowing him to come into a greater awareness of his own feelings, which in turn allowed him to begin helping others within a therapeutic context. The data revealed that personal therapy contributed to a heightened awareness of self-characteristics as well as helping an individual manage the forces of reality. The participants who experienced personal therapy indicated how it helped them come to know themselves better, as well as connect with the perspective of their clients firsthand. For Bill, therapy “helped out a lot, having someone to talk to and give me the comfort to present problems to him.” His idea was that this “would be a role-modeling thing so that I could present problems to other people.” Bill recalls:

One of the things that I did that screwed up a lot of relationships just kind of present the idea that everything's okay, fix all the problems and never really talk about them and so I really didn't get a lot of support for myself....so, he helped me a lot with that.

Samantha also learned so much about herself as a result of being in therapy. Having therapy allowed Samantha to explore and learn more about her self as well as the therapeutic process. For her, therapy has been an important part of professional growth, recalling:

It's funny because you learn so much about yourself, but also how it feels to be a client,.. I like the self-exploration part of it. Ego, I guess. I don't know. Just talking about yourself, and it's funny too because actually I don't talk about myself very much anymore because I listen a lot.

### *Goals*

In this study, goals served to propel and motivate the participants to keep pressing forward in their pursuit of graduate studies. Goals answer the questions "Where am I going?" and "Where do I want to go?" Present and future goals serve to further shape the construction of ideals. The formation of goals also takes into consideration one's professional and personal interests as well as characteristics of the self. After finishing school, Samantha definitely "felt done with school" and set her goal to "really focus on one thing rather than being

spread out over a lot of different places.” Because graduate training experiences are varied by nature to allow exposure to different settings, this is the first time that participants can set goals to gain experience in a focused manner that is based on their professional and personal interests as well as their self-characteristics.

Martha recalled:

I had always liked working with adolescents- had so much experience, had always done it, I had always liked it, except for my internship year and during practicum...so, I wanted to keep doing it, and I wanted to extend the age-range downward. I was just very curious, I wanted to learn—what about 7 year olds, what about 5 year olds? I had been using my Spanish...and I really wanted to develop that and so I shifted my passion for the underserved from the severely mentally ill to the poor and to the immigrants. I had kind of a new avenue for my righteous indignation.

After graduate school, Bill described his goal as “to be more happy and centered in the moment and in charge of where I’m going.” Professionally, he had become more interested in dreams and journaling and wanted to become more skilled in Rorschach interpretation. Personally, he was actively trying to cultivate his personal relationships to a deeper level prompted by his realization that he has “been a good man, but never a best man.” Amanda, Denise, and Fox had always been goal-driven. Amanda defines herself as a “real lists, task-oriented type of

person” who feels her obsessive compulsive traits come in very handy to keep her focused on completing her goals. For Fox, Amanda, Nancy, and Denise, a clear identification of where they were headed and a steady movement in that direction was key to getting through graduate school and to making decisions thereafter. In contrast, Sonia, Bill, Samantha, Martha, and Alex allowed the opportunities that came into their lives to be transformed into opportunities that ultimately led to goal development.

### *Forces of Reality*

The term “forces of reality” refers to the external factors in one’s life, the demands of everyday living that require sustained attention and play a significant role in determining the course of customization. Such forces include key personal relationships in the life of the individual as well as one’s attitude towards the relationships and the impact that such relationships have on daily functioning. While the individual has some control over these forces of reality, because the forces lie outside the individual they will inevitably vary and change over time. Because the forces of reality cannot be meaningfully separated from human feelings and subjective experience, no individual will experience two forces identically; however, each person will interact and deal with forces of reality in their own lives (see Figure 4.3). The degree to which one engages with the forces of reality is another dimension that will also vary. Such forces can be seen as

different from ideals, mainly because ideals exist within the individual and forces of reality are outside of the individual. This bifurcation results in a tendency for these two entities to intervene in the life of the individual in different ways.

Figure 4.3  
Forces of Reality



While the forces of reality were perpetually present during graduate school it appears that such forces came secondary to the primary and intense focus of professional training demands and ideals. For many of my participants, graduate school was described as a period of time that is “not reality” because of the intense training focus, to the detriment of moving forward in what some have termed “real life.” Sonia recalled:

I didn't realize how intense it was and how you really need to devote your life to it, sort of give up some things for those 4 or 5 or 6, 10 years or whatever it takes for you to get your Ph.D....I don't regret going to graduate school and I embrace how intense it was. I think that's good to be intense and dynamic and learning- it's like going through POW camp and

you have to grow and learn from that experience. You have to say that was a growing, learning experience, but I can't be like that here in reality. I have to be a person in society here and be balanced and all that stuff.

Sonia went on to describe graduate school as a “moratorium on her social and emotional development.” Bill and Michael also felt that social and emotional development were placed “on hold” during graduate school. Bill described:

It's funny because I always thought about the Vineland and life skills stopping at 18, but they don't – they keep going and I think in some ways I was stalled in things like- balancing checkbooks and doing taxes and being married and religious practice... All that stuff was kind of put on hold.

Excerpts from Bill's interview along with Tanya, Fox, Sonia, and Michael revealed that the longer one remained in graduate school, the longer development was on hold, a “pause button” on development as mentioned in the transcripts. Thus, although the forces of reality were at work during graduate school, it was not until the completion of graduate school that the individual began to actively attend to the forces of reality in his or her life. For participants who placed some of the forces of reality on hold, several things occurred: relationships began and ended, some marriages failed, finances were depleted, significant debt was accrued, and physical and mental health was sometimes comprised. Others

managed to attend to the forces of reality during and after graduate school. For these individuals, dealing with the forces of reality took a much different course. Martha described that she had never lived her life “single-mindedly” and was by no means going to do this during graduate school; keeping balance kept her focused with things in perspective. She recalled:

I got pregnant when I was in graduate school- I got divorced, I lived alone for awhile, I remarried, I had a few miscarriages, I had my babies, by the time I finished my dissertation- pounds and pounds of life had passed and that was the way that I wanted it to be. I didn't want to say, “Oh, I can't get pregnant because I have to finish my dissertation.” And I didn't want to say, “I can't write my dissertation because I'm pregnant.” I would always kind of do both and I wouldn't do either very fast. I guess that kind of balance is important to me.

Clearly, differences exist in terms of how the forces of reality impact an individual. This is largely based on the degree to which the forces were placed on hold during graduate school. For those who did not actively attend to the forces of reality during graduate school, it was after finishing school that they were confronted with the reality that they were “still needing to learn some things that folks my age already know.” Romantic relationships, family, finances, and health issues were four subcategories of the forces of reality reported by all of the

participants. These forces play a critical role in customization and ultimately, in the construction of professional identity.

### *Romantic Relationships*

Having a partner had a definite impact on dealing with the forces of reality. For Denise, while things were going well in her postdoctoral residency in Georgia, her husband had an extremely difficult time finding work as an electrician. He eventually moved back to Texas. Although Denise wasn't able to leave immediately, she ultimately left Georgia to join her husband in Texas. For her, the job in Georgia was everything she had wanted, but the reality of her relationship and her husband's difficulties finding work forced her to seek other options. Martha's new romance prompted her decision to stay local for her internship and post-doc based on her new relationship, given her belief that her relationship was in a "critical phase" and was "too young to leave town." This relationship ultimately led to marriage, which for her made the professional decisions that she made all "worth it." Sonia's relationship ended after graduate school:

Yeah, getting a divorce was tough...I was the first one ever in my family to get a divorce and so it was very traumatic...because it was socially and emotionally and spiritually and it was just not a good scene. You know I never really regretted...I don't regret getting a divorce...I tell people that I

was married before and they find it very not like my personality I guess.

They're surprised that I have an ex-husband, like a dirty dark secret. Who doesn't these days?

### *Family*

Family was another force of reality that played a significant role in customization. Attending to the needs of one's family took precedent over many of the other forces of reality. For Tanya, her pregnancy left her feeling very tired. The fatigue she experienced caused her to start cutting back her hours and reevaluate if she wanted to work full-time. Having never cut back for fear that others would think she wasn't "working hard enough," Tanya decided to cut back on her hours for the sake of her baby. For Amanda, giving birth to twins during customization was an amazing and life-changing experience. After seven months with her babies, her husband unexpectedly lost his job. Forced to return to work full-time, she was disgruntled at first, but made the decision to put her children first and provide for her family during this tumultuous time- this had not been her original plan.

Family life was the highest priority for Alex, Martha, and Nancy during graduate school and into customization. The words of Martha address the sentiments of those who were driven by the "force" of family:

I could change my mind, but I won't because in spite of my feelings of what I want for myself personally, I have a duty to my family, duty to my family at this stage in my life has to come first.

While Nancy was on internship, her son became very angry with her because of the time she had to spend committed to the internship. This experience with her son during internship prompted her to look for a postdoctoral position that allowed greater flexibility and more time with her son and husband. Having felt like she "could hardly be there for anybody" because she was so "spent" by the end of day, Nancy decided to take a part-time postdoctoral residency over two years, rather than keep the breakneck speed that she had to keep throughout internship. Driving all of these decisions is the notion of family ties. Considering what would give a person more time with his or her children as well as the financial stability to provide the things that they needed were factors that seemed to keep these individuals focused. Alex recalled that his focus on being a father diverted a lot of his attention during school, pointing out one of the ramifications of his decision. "I felt like my first priority was to be a good husband and a good father, and graduate school came second. And I probably didn't study as hard as I could have or should have."

### *Finances*

For those who were married, there was a sense of needing to provide financially for one's family that permeated the transcripts, particularly for my two male participants, Alex and Fox. Alex felt that "the greatest accomplishment was to just make it through and support my wife and three kids along the way." The financial implications of graduate school and most often, the loans that need to be paid back after the graduate school experience are a force of reality that absolutely can not be ignored. While the years spent trying to "make ends meet on peanuts" and survive are over in some respects, managing finances and money management has just begun. Questions such as; "Can I survive and keep my family alive?" perpetually drive this time in life for some. For others, like Bill and Michael, who were single during this phase, it was a time to exercise new financial freedom. Michael felt that he "deserved things and had earned them-like the best cable package, a new car and a new home." He spent money "like it was water" and later realized his "egocentric child-likeness" of fulfilling every impulse after all of his sacrifices during graduate school was actually resulting in thousands of dollars of debt that he is still repaying. When Bill entered private practice, his image for himself did not involve "driving a 1982 Nissan Sentra." Although he felt like these two things "to the world don't go together," he hesitated to jump into financial hardship to get a new car, a new house, and all the "stuff" that he thought would go along nicely with the clients he was seeing in

private practice. The financial sacrifices in graduate school, left Bill, along with Fox, Martha, and Denise, leery of jumping into more financial commitments immediately after graduate school. For these individuals, two to five years out of graduate school, they were now looking for new cars or had just moved into a new home at the time of the interviews.

### *Health Issues*

Health issues were a force of reality that could not be ignored for some of the participants. When health was jeopardized in anyway, it resulted in a pause from many areas of daily functioning and often, gave permission for a time to reevaluate. Health problems forced Denise and Tanya to come face to face with the reality that they needed to take better care of themselves. For Denise, her high blood pressure and migraine headaches left her feeling like she “wasn’t herself.” Tanya also suffered from migraine headaches and fainting spells, which once left her in the emergency room, forcing her to make some changes to help her manage stress. Fox, Bill, and Sonia also felt that they had little time for themselves, which left little time or energy to think about the “best practice” for stress management. Most participants described dealing with stress in an “autopilot” fashion. Denise described feeling like she “didn’t know how I managed to do anything good or healthy to manage stress... I just survived.” Most participants endorsed being in a “survival mode” related to stress

management after graduate school. For some, health problems resulted in necessary lifestyle changes, which included exercise, sleep, reducing work hours, and even changing jobs to eliminate stress and long commutes. More than the desire to “live healthy,” these lifestyle health choices appear to have been prompted by participants’ desire to keep working; without attending to health needs, one would not be able to work at all. A quote from Denise provides a striking illustration: “I had my surgery over spring break so I could go back to work...that’s how bad I am.”

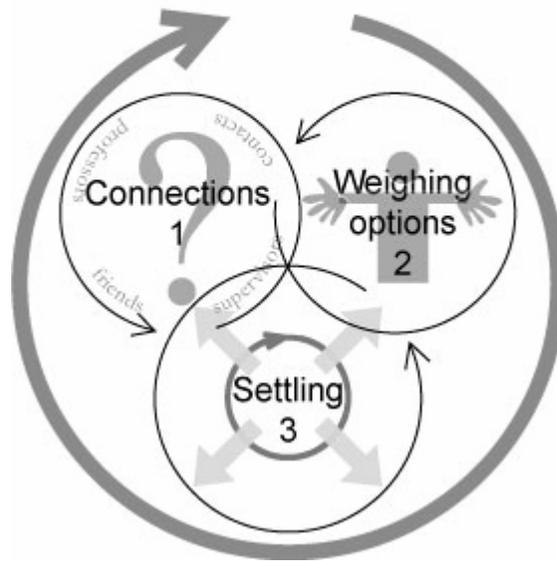
The constructs of the forces of reality and ideals correspond to the literature noting the “internal/external focus” of the novice professional during the early establishment phase (Savickas, 2002). Fouad (2003) described this internal/external focus as the individual’s attempt to “make congruent the inner world of self and the outside world” (pg. 83) throughout his or her career. Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003) described the relevance of this finding for psychologists noting the relationship between the internal and external realities for therapists, and how that relationship will differ over time. The internal/external distinction has also been described in the literature as motivation for behavior (Savickas, 2002; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2002). External refers to “the external and rigid mode of training” (pg. 23) during graduate school where the student is motivated by people and

entities outside of the self, while the “internal, flexible mode” (pg. 23) is described to occur after graduate school once the individual is functioning out in the profession and motivated to work independently of others (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). In recent years, the literature has started to address the internal and external realities that the therapist deals with as well as the motivators for behavior; however, prior to the current study, an account of the specific factors that comprise these “realities” was nonexistent. Thus, the current study furthers this body of research by identifying some of the explicit internal and external factors that affect the lives of early career psychologists and contribute to behavior, particularly decision-making behaviors.

#### *The Heart of Decision-Making During Customization*

Having described ideals and forces of reality in detail, the central process situated within the customization model will now be addressed. This central process is comprised of three primary components, located inside the center circle of Figure 4.1. These components are connections, weighing the options, and settling. Each component is significantly influenced by ideals and the forces of reality. While each component is a process in and of itself, it is the summative value of these three components that leads to the decision(s) that are made during customization. Each early career psychologist will experience the three components of customization (See Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4  
The Heart of Decision-making



The time at which customization commences is at the conclusion of graduate school. Thus, as graduate school is ending, customization is beginning. Many participants indicated that because graduate school had become the central focus for many years, there was a period of reintegration where each person had to make a transition as a “ person in society...balanced and all that stuff.” This period of reintegration is a critical time in the life of the individual. Compounding this time of reintegration is the need to make several important decisions, often within a very short period of time. Finding a job as an early career psychologist is not necessarily a “given” after graduate school. The early

career psychologist must consider what he or she wants to do for this next phase of life. Asking oneself questions serves as the impetus for the decision-making process to be set into motion during customization. Examples of such questions include: “What are my professional options?” “What do I see myself doing?” “What do I need more experience in?” “Where am I going to work?” “Do I want to work full-time or part-time?” “What will happen to my family if I work full-time?”

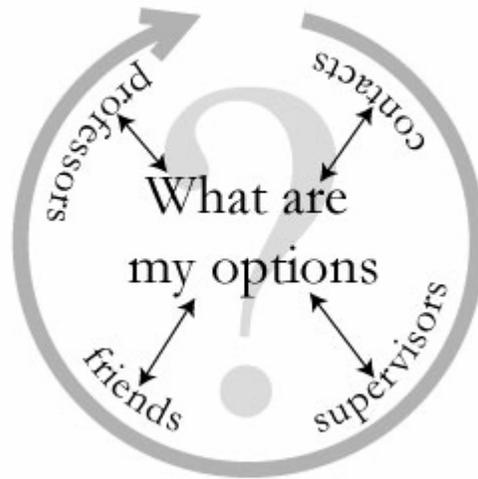
As emerging professionals begin to contemplate these questions, the process of customization has already begun. The influences of the forces of reality and ideals are also perpetually present. It is important to note that this process is referring to professional job options for the early career psychologist. Thus, there must be options available in order for the individual to engage in this decision-making process. The transcripts revealed that the options available to an individual are created by one’s connections. Once the options are created, a weighing of such options follows, and ultimately, settling on an option(s) occurs. This is a dynamic process that results in a decision being made. The decision that is made is then under scrutiny by the individual, constantly being evaluated and reevaluated to see if the job is satisfying the forces of reality and is a comfortable position relative to one’s ideas. Because this phase of development occurs during the early stages of one’s career, such decisions are often made cautiously and are

tentative, in the sense that they are still newly made decisions. Satisfaction with one's decisions is contingent upon one's ability to successfully balance ideals with forces of reality. Feelings about such decisions and perception of balance are consequences of the decision-making process that will be described later in this section. The following section will describe the three central components of the customization process and illustrate this process using examples from the data.

### *Connections*

The time between graduate school and securing a postdoctoral residency begins the "official" transition from student to professional. While one is acquiring the necessary professional skills throughout training, this is the first time that the individual is professionally independent in many ways. It is at this time that the individual begins to ask the question, "What are my options?" The data revealed that options are created, for the most part, by connections that have been made through professional contacts. Previous supervisors, professors, teachers, and friends were sources of connections (see Figure 4.5). These are sources of connections that emerging professionals turn to and rely on in efforts to secure employment. Although this step is not inherently complex within the decision-making process, it is critical in creating options.

Figure 4.5  
Connections



Samantha recalled the time in her life as she was transitioning from student to professional as “very busy” and lacking extra time to conduct an elaborate job search. Moving back to the city where she had completed her graduate training, she “very much relied on the connections I already had” to find professional options. For Fox, the time during which he was trying to establish connections was “frustrating” as he asked himself, “Where could I get a job? I was not yet licensed. Nobody wanted a not licensed Ph.D. person. They would rather have a licensed master’s person.” He described the role of luck and connections in securing a post-doc with a set pay and set responsibilities and the excitement about finding a “J-O-B!” For Nancy, she connected with a teacher who taught a class during her internship who later offered her a position.

Michael, Sonia, Alex, and Tanya remained in the agencies where they had completed their internships, relying on the connections they had made during that year. Martha reported that she was “always looking one step ahead,” trying to find a connection before she left a position to ensure she always had a job lined up. Denise relied heavily on connections after completing her post-doctoral residency in Georgia. Wanting to get back to Texas, she contacted members of her cohort from graduate school. One of these individuals recommended her for a position in a local school district. She recalled that if it had not been for her connections, securing a job as a director of psychological services would never have happened. Interestingly, Alex didn’t even try to network or make contacts of any sort, reporting that his focus on “surviving” during the internship and post-doc were his priority. Bill recalled:

The unique thing about the guidance center was my supervisor and I worked really closely. She treated me a lot more like a colleague than a supervisee. We go pretty far back. She was my supervisor for my very first practicum class. So, although we haven’t hung out a lot, she had known me 5 or 6 years ago.

The connection Bill had with his previous supervisor during his post-doctoral year “really helped create a bridge from school to work... It made me feel a little more secure, like I had a connection beyond just what my output was going to be.”

While connections played an instrumental role in securing positions during the post-doctoral year, they also created opportunities for positions in the following years. For those participants who had committed to a one-year postdoctoral position, it was again time to make connections in hopes of securing professional opportunities that would last for more than a year. Although some participants found professional options that they have continued in since their post-doctoral residency, in my study the average number of jobs that early career psychologists had subsequent to their post-doctoral experience was two. This number indicates the transitory nature of this early career period as well as the critical importance of connections during this time as an individual may be looking for different positions. For example, throughout the last five years Amanda has had three different positions. After completing her post-doctoral year in a private school and continuing in that setting for another year prior to the birth of her twins, Amanda made a transition to a guidance center to work with children. Unfortunately, she had a difficult experience at the guidance center, as she felt overworked, stressed out, and underpaid. Eventually, she began looking for other options, turning to the connections she had made during graduate school in hopes of creating new options:

So, I came over here and I talked with one of the psychologists that I had been working with.... She was one of my supervisors when I was still in

graduate school... I came over. I talked with her and she said “Yes! Let’s keep in touch. Let’s talk about what’s available,” and things like that. I wanted to kind of let her know that I was interested, and if they had anything available, please keep me in mind. And in August of that year, we set up a meeting, and I came and talked with her. And they said, “We really haven’t had an inpatient psychologist in a few years. And we’d really like to have somebody back over there that’s committed to just doing inpatient work and here’s this whole thing. You want it?” I said, “Yes, actually I do! Thank you very much.” So it just, darn lucky, fell into my lap. Umm...knew the people here, they knew me because I’d been doing work for them. So it was just very natural to pull everything together. So I gave three weeks notice and left.

After positions were secured, connections were also instrumental once these emerging professionals were out in the field and practicing. Denise relied heavily on her connections and contacts to build up a department that she had been hired to revamp. While working for the school district, Denise recalled, “hiring a lot of good people that I knew. I hired all the people I knew... stole them away from other districts and built up a really good department and established an internship... It was fun for three years.” Bill believes the reason he went into private practice is related to connections he had with a former supervisor who

“took him under her wing.” Connections are not explicitly referred to in the literature. The importance of mentor relationships are referred to extensively in the literature and how these relationships lead to opportunities (Goodyear et al., 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1991; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). While mentors provided one vital avenue for connections, the current study found there to be other factors that contributed equally to making connections and creating professional opportunities.

### *Weighing the Options*

Once options have been created via connections, the next step in this decision making process requires weighing these options. Because of the prescribed bounds of the graduate school experience, this is often the first opportunity one has to independently evaluate the available options and begin making decisions that fit best for the individual. Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003) describe that there is a newfound freedom of the novice professional as they have been released from graduate school. This new found freedom can be seen in the current study as the opportunity for early career psychologists to independently evaluate their professional options, taking into consideration ideals and the forces of reality. The “weighing” process involves a constant comparative method, which occurs at both a conscious and subconscious level. The available options

are tabulated and organized according in attempts to find a balance between the ideals and the forces of reality (see Figure 4.6).

Figure 4.6  
Weighing Options



Coming out of graduate school, all participants were focused on weighing options with consideration for the necessary state licensure requirements. As state licensure requirements are largely prescribed, individuals were predisposed to consider positions that met necessary licensure requirements. For many participants, the weighing process was minimal during this period of time, as the focus was on “getting licensed.” Alex wanted to get licensed as soon as possible. To do this, he “decided to stick around for another year” at the same site where he had completed his internship. Although he didn’t think he was going to be challenged, remarking that he “likes challenges” because they allow him to grow, he had to weigh what was most practical for his family. Completing his post-

doctoral residency at the site of his internship site made sense on a practical level upon examination of the forces of reality that were present in his life and served to meet the needs of his family and fulfill licensure requirements. For most participants, there was a sense of frustration during the “lag time” between graduating with one’s Ph.D. and becoming a licensed professional. This frustration weighed heavily on the minds and hearts of the participants as they weighed the options. Fox recalled:

A lot of it was what were my options in terms of a job? Where could I get a job? I was not yet licensed, you know. So you have that lag time between when you finish your post-doc...I was lucky enough to get a post-doc. I was very excited to get a set post-doc with a set pay and you know set responsibilities. I was very excited!

Fox weighed options that would provide the best financial compensation for him and his wife. His wife was pregnant at the time that he was weighing his options. Fox felt that a taking a position with the schools was his best option, although he was not pleased about the fact that had to forego the practice of therapy. Additionally, Fox had to weigh the implications of going back to school to complete the necessary coursework to be licensed in the schools, particularly after having graduated with his Ph.D. in counseling psychology. After weighing the options in terms of what was best for his family and the stability of this position

and paycheck in the schools, he thought working in the schools was the best option and aspired to have some time in the future to utilize his clinical skills in private practice. In his words,

I kind of looked in the schools because I knew it was something that was very stable and it paid very well for a first year out. You know I was pretty happy with how I did pay-wise. Umm...so and it was easy, and it was something I knew I could do. And it was interesting. There were a lot of different things about it that were good. It was a good vacation job. But it was a good learning experience. It's not the ideal...it's not being a psychologist...it was being an LSSP. So, and I knew it wasn't going to be forever and ever and ever, but I knew it was a great place to be.

After weighing the options, Bill knew he wanted to work in a community mental health center. In the summer of 2000, after becoming licensed he worked hard to find a community mental health position. Bill recalled that he was not alone in this process. He had a couple of friends that were a support to him as they too were wrestling with the same issues: "We were all getting done, all wondering what we were gonna do, all fishing for jobs." Bill was offered a job at a community mental health center but it did not end up working out: "Apparently, they hired two people for the same job and umm, I got the short end of the stick." This situation gave Bill the opportunity to take a step back and

weigh his options a second time. He recalled that this “turned out to be a good thing,” as he ended up with a position he has grown to love.

For Denise, weighing the financial implications of the available options was of critical importance. When she began to weigh her options, she found that staying on the East Coast was probably not the best option, both for her husband and in terms of the cost of living. Although the professional position that was offered to her was one that she would grow in, it did not seem like a good option after considering the forces of reality. She has had regrets since then, particularly after talking with her former internship supervisor who said, “If you’d just hung on for a little bit longer we could have gotten you into an even better position.” In Denise’s situation she had to weigh the options available in the present moment in light of the forces of reality. For most participants, it was often the case that options had to be weighed in the moment without being able to think with a future orientation. Thus, Denise weighed the options available to her at that specific moment in time and acted on the information she had. The bottom line for Denise was that “the position wasn’t very much money and I felt like I needed to start contributing more to the family.”

Weighing the options became increasingly salient in the lives of the participants post-licensure, particularly for some of the female participants. For four out of six of the women in my study, the weighing of options shifted from a

career focus to a family focus. Two to three years out of graduate school, these women gave considerable attention to professional options that allowed time for maternity leave, time with newborn babies, and reduced hours to meet the needs of family. For Amanda and Tanya, they were ready to have a family and shift from career mode to “mommy mode” after delaying their families for several years to complete the graduate program. For these women, it was imperative that professional options met the needs of one’s family, and secondly, was a role that one felt comfortable performing professionally.

Martha’s sentiments accurately reflect sentiments of the working mothers in the study: “I’m gonna be driven by what will give me more time with my children and is stable for them and allows me to provide for my family....and I would not do something I hate.” If Nancy’s family were not a heavily weighted priority during this period of her life, she reported that she “would have gone back to the XXX- ivy league school” where she did her practicum and “do whatever they want me to do, even if I did it for free.” For Martha, although she is in a position that is providing for her family and meeting her professional needs at this time, she felt that she would always be open to considering an option that if she “liked it about as well as what I am doing or a little less, or a little more, and would give me more time with my family, I’ll jump on it!” Martha later weighed options in terms of the professional context in which she saw herself practicing:

I think if you think back over all the conversation we've had I've pretty much always had my professional goals as parallel to my personal goals. I would have gotten out of graduate school in four or five years if I was putting my professional goals ahead of my marriage, my vacations, you know. I just think my professional life to be a part of my life. And probably why I loved the guidance center is because I had a personal life at work.

An example from the life of Amanda serves to illustrate the cyclical nature of the process involved in the weighing of the options. Although Amanda had decided to commit to a professional position that she thought would be a place for her to learn, grow, and gain stability, she felt "very trapped" in the position after a year. She recalled:

I felt very trapped until I felt like I had any other options in terms of another position. And just felt very trapped in terms of not...I don't know if trapped is the right word, but really feeling like I was hitting a brick wall. Feeling like I was doing everything that I knew to do to educate these people and to convey to them what was going on, and really felt like I was making absolutely no head way. And didn't see a light at the end of the tunnel. Didn't see it changing over a period of time. Didn't see that every getting any better.

These feelings were influencing Amanda's personal and professional life. She was often seeing six or seven clients back to back with little time for herself. She would come home feeling exhausted and stressed, with two newborn babies in the home, she felt like she had nothing left to give. Her feelings and perpetual discomfort in her current work environment prompted her to reconnect with her connections to create and weigh other options.

Interestingly, the male participants in the study who had families also weighed options in light of their family's needs; however, this tended to be more monetarily driven and based on the ability of a job to provide financially for the family. Bringing in the necessary monetary resources to provide stability in the home was the priority, with additional time and flexible hours at home with children coming second. This appears to be consistent with the literature that speaks to the differences in motivation as it relates to gender differences.

For participants who did not have young children in the home, different factors were involved in the weighing of options. Michael, Bill, Denise, and Sonia were able to focus more on finding their "ideal" position, with less attention given to the forces of reality related to children and family. Options were weighed largely in terms of financial stability, location of the position, flexibility, ability, and opportunity for professional advancement. These individuals weighed the options that would allow them the best professional opportunity and matched

professional interests. As Bill began to weigh the options after the post-doctoral year, he was mentally preparing himself to agree to another year of either half-time or full-time work with the schools and some work at the guidance center depending on funding. After weighing the options, Bill decided he did not want to work for the school district due to the low pay. His weighing of that option “came down to financial and being spread too thin to do good work. Your role is too limited, too limited in the schools.” When the opportunity came up to work with a cooperative of charter schools and create his own position, he jumped on it. He was excited about the position because of the fact that he would have the luxury of “me defining what I want to do and it pays a lot more” as well as the opportunity to create his own job description. At the time Bill weighed his options he did not realize that he would be able to create his own position, recalling:

I didn’t even know I had the ability to do that at any job, so it’s really important now. It was definitely a luxury and I created the image of “a guy who responds to schools when they have a crisis.”

### *Settling*

Settling is the third component of the central process of customization. Once the options have been weighed, a decision is made and the individual begins to settle into that decision. The settling component of the decision-making process is critically important given its implications for the longevity of one’s

professional career. Thus, the following section will attend to the process and importance of settling for the early career psychologist. Settling has two different levels: the first level is settling into a job; the second level is settling into the profession within the larger context of psychology and professions as a whole. Settling is an active experience at both levels. Making the decision engages the settling process, with the next step requiring time and prolonged engagement with a decision for an individual to begin to “settle in” and consequently experience the two levels of settling. This time allows for the individual to examine whether or not the forces of reality and ideals are being adequately met. The individual is also beginning to settle into the profession, including formalizing his or her views about the field after graduate school, about therapy and assessment, and about self as a professional. The following diagram highlights the fact that settling is an active, experiential process that takes place in the life of the new professional during customization (See Figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7  
Settling



The settling process is best described as fluid, much more than a finite moment in time at which a decision is made. This fluidity highlights the ongoing nature of this process. Given the negative connotations of the term “settling” in our vernacular, it is important to clarify the usage of this term for the purposes of the current discussion and to draw attention to the fact that settling is not inherently negative. The process of settling is one that each person engages in, whether or not it is referred to as “settling” per se. Are there choices that individuals settle on that fail to be all that they had imagined the position would be? Yes; most positions fall into this category at this phase of professional identity construction; however, most individuals settle on choices that sufficiently

address the forces of reality that are present in their lives in conjunction with their ideals.

*Thinking and feeling.* The data revealed that an individual's perception of the settling process plays an important role. Such perceptions consist of both thoughts and feelings. The thinking component includes the thought process involved in making the decision as it contributes to the perception of the chosen option and often, rationalization and resolution about choices that have been made. The feeling component refers to the subjective feelings about the decision that has been made. The transcripts revealed that perceptions of settling can be placed along a continuum, ranging from feelings of regret to feelings of satisfaction with regards to the decisions that have been made. Ultimately, the thoughts and feelings that comprise perceptions of settling influence the decision of the early career psychologist to either continue in the settling process or to reengage with the overall decision-making process to create different options (e.g., connections, weighing options, and settling). An example from the life of Alex serves to illustrate the fluctuation of perceptions as they are formed during settling. He recalled:

Probably depend on the day and what I was thinking about. You know, because I had a lot of good things, a lot of positive things going on. And I've already been making money, you know, as far as what I've been

doing...So I was feeling, “Okay, at least I can make money at this.”

Maybe it’s a...you know...maybe the feeling itself isn’t all that great but at least I can make a living and support my family and hopefully along the way I can kind of carve something out that I feel good about doing.

This example illustrates thinking and feeling. As for the thinking component, Alex thought about the positive things going on and the fact that he was making good money in his position as a private practitioner. As for feelings, his subjective feelings about his work and contributions to the field at this point were not very positive, but he felt good that he was providing for the needs of his family. In the life of Alex, he is currently dealing with the forces of reality (wife, family, finances, and health) and he has made a resolve that he would like to “carve something out” that he feels good about. He has satisfaction in his decisions in light of the fact that that he is making adequate progress toward ideals while balancing reality demands. On the other end of the feeling continuum is regret. Feelings of regret are experienced when an individual is not satisfied with his or her current position. This occurs when the individual feels like the position is not striving towards their ideals, with the decision made based primarily upon the weighted presence of the forces of reality. Because the perceptions consist of thoughts and feelings, no perception is completely regretful as this would be detrimental to daily functioning. This is where the thinking

component serves as a complementary component to feelings in making perceptions. Thinking provides rationalizations about the decision that serve to inform feelings in order for the individual to “make the most” out of the less than ideal situation. An excerpt from Martha’s transcript provides an example of thinking and feeling as it pertains to regret within the settling process:

I don’t really feel ambivalent about my choices. I feel like I made choices that were good for me. I just...when I do stop and think about it, realize with the choices there have been some losses. That it came to a fork in the road where I had to pick one or the other and I think I picked the right one, but I still miss the one that I could have picked.

*Time.* The passage of time is also a factor in the settling process. Time spent reflecting on decisions influences perceptions of settling. The data revealed that most participants perceived a combination of regret and satisfaction at different times throughout settling. When feelings of regret exceeded feelings of satisfaction, participants examined their decision in light of the forces of reality and their ideals. This examination included revisiting why a decision was made, which may include a revisiting of all three components of the decision-making process (connections, weighing the options, and settling).

There are two levels at which the settling process occurs: settling into a job and settling into the profession. Settling into a job occurs at the individual

level, beginning with the decision to take a professional position and with the perceptions related to this decision. Settling into the job continues as the individual becomes more familiar with the professional position and context. Settling into a job can be seen as situated within the global process of settling into the profession. Settling into the profession begins with the decision to settle into the job, but does not end there. While settling into a job begins and ends during customization, settling into the profession commences during customization and continues for the duration of one's professional career. Figure 4.7 provided a visual depiction of these two processes and the dimensions that are relevant to the settling process. The following discussion will examine the settling process as it pertains to these two levels.

*Settling into a job.* After the decision of which job to take has been made, the early career psychologist begins to settle into a job. The beginning of settling into a job serves to seal the transition from student to professional. The following example of settling into a job is taken from the life of Nancy. Upon completion of the post-doctoral residency, Nancy decided to take a job as an educational diagnostician. Based on the needs of her family, she felt working for the schools was the best option that provided the schedule she needed to attend to the needs of her family. Nancy perceived that it was going to be very difficult to find a job at the doctoral level that would give her the flexibility she needed to meet the needs

of her family. After completing her internship and post-doctoral year, she perceived that the workload of a doctoral position would far exceed what she was capable of doing at this time. Nancy felt that “you just can’t do therapy and be off for three months and not take any work home.” Not having to take work home and having fixed responsibilities in the schools was important for Nancy and influenced her decision to settle on the job as an educational diagnostician. In making this decision, she decided to forego the professional practice of psychology to attend to the forces of reality in her life (marriage and family). On the cusp of finishing a full year in her current position, she indicated that she “certainly misses therapy.. and I miss the Rorschach.. I really liked giving that,” but she has really enjoyed the freedom to be with her family. Nancy indicated that this position has allowed her to have a better “quality of life,” which contributes to her perception of satisfaction with this decision although this position is not necessarily ideal. Nancy’s perception of satisfaction appears consistent with the definition of satisfaction that is cited in the lifespan career development literature, which construes satisfaction as a manifestation of a subjective sense of purpose or goals (Jepsen & Sheu, 2003). Nancy felt that her purpose was to be a mother to her teenage son, so she made an occupational choice within her profession that allows her the flexibility to have time with her

family. Ultimately, this choice will give her satisfaction as she will be more successful in her attempts to balance the forces of reality and ideals.

Beginning with her post-doctoral year, Amanda began settling into a job as a psychologist working with a private school. During this period of settling, Amanda tried to establish herself in the position attempting to “meet their needs, but trying to meet my needs too in terms of what I thought was appropriate at the same time.” Being new in the position is a time that many participants endorsed a definite sense of negotiation that took place at the beginning of the settling process. Amanda continued to try and communicate with the school about what she thought was the role of a psychologist in the schools. Unfortunately, her view of the role of a psychologist and the school’s view of what a psychologist should be doing never matched up. Three years later, she left the position after a series of failed attempts to settle into the job.

After working in a context that Martha had settled into, the forces of reality (finances and family) caused her to look for other options that were more lucrative. After weighing the options, Martha decided on a job as clinical director of a non-profit agency. She indicated that since she has become director, she has grown tremendously and appears to be working to settle into her current position. In the following excerpt, Martha compares the job she had with the position she has currently. This quotation illustrates the process of settling and how Martha

used her perceptions of feeling settled and satisfied in one position in efforts to recreate this environment in her current position:

It has been a good growth experience, because I've realized that I can do all kinds of different things that I need to do. I've created a program.

There was not one and now there is. And I've used a lot of what I learned in my prior experience to create an environment that's nurturing to people who come, that's safe for people, where people are recognized and appreciated. Trying to create the kind of environment that I work well in, not just for me...but for other people.

*Settling into the profession.* While at one level, the early career psychologist is settling into a job, they are also settling into the profession at large. For some, settling into a job and settling into the profession resulted in similar perceptions, while for others perceptions for each level of settling were different. In the life of Nancy, while she reported feelings of satisfaction with her position as an educational diagnostician in the schools and was settling into this position, she had not begun to settle into the profession. As she had chosen not to practice psychology, she indicated feeling frustrated that she had worked "that hard to get her doctorate" and she was not getting to "use all the pieces of it." She indicated that she has felt "a loss of identity...this is very different." This excerpt reveals the fact that while Nancy had settled into a job, she has not settled into the

profession. It was unclear at the time of the second interview whether or not she would ever settle into the profession of psychology. Although Nancy had regret for her loss of identity as a psychologist because of the decisions she has made, the fact is the forces of reality in her life are being met, which allow her to feel satisfied and perceive that she made the best decision for her family.

While Alex has settled into his job, his perception of settling into the profession is in the infancy stage. He reported feeling unsure about whether or not he has been helpful to others as a professional psychologist. Although private practice has proved to be lucrative for Alex, he has often found himself thinking, “How useful is what I’m doing?” and “is this giving back to anybody? Is this helping anybody?” He also expressed disillusionment about the field as a whole since he has been working professionally. After finishing graduate school, Alex indicated that he has been somewhat disillusioned by the “pay off” of all those years in school, not so much for him personally, but for the other people that he sees in the field:

I think a lot of people in our profession don’t do all that well. And sort of go through grad school with the idea that you’ll at least be able to pay to bills when you’re done and I don’t know that that’s necessarily the case. I mean I feel fortunate in that. But it just seems like a shame to you know, spend minimum probably ten years in college and then get out and you

know...all kinds of people make way more money than you do. And they kind of warn you along the way that if you're looking for a lucrative job you're in the wrong field. I think what we do is so important I just don't understand why it's so undervalued.

At the time of the second interview, Alex had mixed feelings of satisfaction and regret. Should the forces of reality cause Alex to have to weigh other factors, his perception of settling may change. In this case, time will be the factor that tells whether or not changes will be made. After settling into her job, Samantha has questioned her graduate school experience and some of the decisions she has made along the way. After graduate school, Samantha went through a period of feeling very confident to "feeling not quite sure umm, knowing at all what I wanted or where I was going... lot of questioning...a lot of disillusionment." Samantha took time to contemplate her feelings and think about what she wanted to do within the field of psychology. The result has been Samantha beginning to perceive balance as she settles into the profession:

I always want to work in a place where I have both commitment and passion towards it, umm, but also there are a lot of practical constraints to professional jobs across the board that can cause frustration that I have to deal with too...The fact is I can find balance in both.

After settling on a job, the early career psychologist experiences many clinical encounters as he or she begins to settle into the profession. Settling into the profession can be likened to the “stabilizing within a career” (pg. ) that takes place during the “early establishment” phase of career development described by Savickas (2002). The developmental tasks associated with the establishment phase include stabilizing a job (making a living at work by doing the work satisfactorily), consolidating one’s position, and then advancing or refining self-concept in new areas. The current research effort found that in addition to advancing and refining self-concept as has been described in the literature, early career psychologists are also advancing and refining their views about professional work and their conceptualization of clinical work. As Martha continued to use her clinical skills in her professional position, her view of therapy and her perception of her role as a professional helper changed. Most recently, Martha has settled into the realization that she cannot “help everyone.” After an extremely difficult case with a client who later committed suicide, she had time to reflect on her views about therapy and has come to the following understanding of therapy and the type of clients that seem to benefit most from therapy.

This client was the first example that this tool of psychotherapy that we’ve developed is only a wrench-- not very good for nails. And I thought of my

firm conviction there's a lot that you can do for the severely mentally ill, therapy alone without all those other things and without the support of a psychosocial program including medication, family and community- It's really just one piece. You know, I had not had that degree of drama before, I always had problems happen, people drop out of therapy, realize things happen with the therapist and I would personalize it...this time I really did not feel that I could have done something differently for her.

This was the first time as an early career psychologist that Martha felt comfortable with her professional decisions. She recalled "this was may have been the first time when something happened connected to my therapy, where I didn't say... if I had known." Clinical experiences also contributed to Fox's perception of settling. As Fox began settling into the profession he began to ...deal with the realities of therapy, seeing what it is really like and learning the limitations, the limitations that you're not going to be successful in every case. Sometimes you are just not going to know what to do, and you just ask somebody. Or refer out, and I've done that. There are some clients that come in and I don't do that.. I'm not going to try to fake it because it's not the right thing to do. And that's where your voice, your internal supervisor has to say, "You're not trained in doing that!" Yeah you could use the money. And there are some people kind of learn

trial and error and they do that. They kind of take on anybody, read a book about it, whatever. But I, there are some things I just won't do.

Fox was not willing to compromise his clinical standards in order to “be all things to all people.” He began to cultivate an awareness of the “realities” of therapy and relied on his ideals, his “internal supervisor” that helped guide his decision-making once he began independently practicing psychology.

#### Final Thoughts About Customizing Professional Identity

The theoretical model depicted in Figure 4.1 and illustrated in the above narrative examined an important process situated within the customization phase of professional identity. The decision-making process described in this study is of critical importance for early career psychologists during the transition from student to professional. Because the early career psychologist has just begun to establish him or herself in the professional practice of psychology, perceptions and feelings related to recently made decisions are expected to shift. Thus, this model highlights a process that begins during this phase and will continue in the years to come. Bill's life provides an example of the transitory nature of perceived balance at this phase of development: “I think I vacillate between feeling really good about the job I'm in to feeling like I'm not quite able to do you know, a hundred percent, a thorough enough job- spread too thin.”

Once the individual begins to feel settled in, the data suggests that the early career psychologist's perception of ideals and orientation towards the forces of reality begins to shift. This is consistent with the literature that points to the shifting of "internal/external focus" during the establishment phase of career development (Savickas, 2002). Once Bill started to settle into his job, he indicated that he went back to church, began meditating and has been helping with church ministry efforts in his community. Bill has also taken initiative to deal with the forces of reality head on (finances, health). He found a stockbroker to help him manage his money and an accountant to help him work on his taxes. He reports that his "life skills have become better," he no longer feasts on junk food, and he prefers to cook his own meals. He also has plans to buy a house and a new car in the near future. After settling into his new position, Bill has had more time to "think and formulate ideas about where I am with family, what I want to do, and how to interact." He spends more time with loved ones who live far away, particularly his older brother who suffered a head injury and continues to adapt to this life-changing event. Bill attributed that time with loved ones is now possible because of the fact that he has a steady job, money, and time off to go visit. He recalled that if only "I would have had all that stuff, I would have visited them a heck of a lot more."

While Alex has settled in many ways into his current job, he has entertained thoughts about the future and what he ideally sees himself doing and what might occur as he continues to settle into the profession. Although he is satisfied at the present time, he is uncertain about what the future may hold and the changes he might need to make “if, and when, the time comes.”

When something has to be done... I'll make changes. I mean, you know I can rationalize pretty well. Now I'm making good money doing this. I get so busy that I don't really have time to just sit back and contemplate the whole thing you know. For to say “Okay now I'm going to shift gears and do this totally different, you know isn't real practical for me at this point. But certainly it's something that I think about and I don't know what it'll take to kind of push me over the edge. Maybe it'll happen, maybe it won't. I don't know.

Although Michael had settled into his job with the schools and was beginning to settle into the profession, he has begun having second thoughts. Michael indicated that he did not think he could truly settle into the profession so far away from his family. Although he felt that the distance from his family “wasn't too bad” when he made the decision to live far away two years ago, two years later he has changed his mind. At the time of the second interview, he was trying to establish connections and reengage in the decision-making process of

customization. For Michael, finding a position working in the schools and being close to family is the perfect balance necessary to allow him to settle into the profession.

The above examples illustrate the fact that the customization process has just begun for these individuals and there are many changes that will transpire in the settling process. While it is difficult to thoroughly portray the complexities and cyclical nature of this continuous process, it is hoped that the reader has gained an appreciation for the customization phase of professional identity construction. Because customization of one's career is in its infancy stage, there may be additional dimensions that will contribute to this model as the early career psychologist gains more experience, exposure, and encounters in the profession. Fouad (2003) highlights the need to explicitly address the novice professional therapist's negotiation of exactly how she or he wants to fit work into their lives. The current model has appeared to fill the void in the literature by focusing explicitly on the decision-making process of the early career psychologists as they transition into the professional world and deal with the forces of reality. Instead of focusing generally on these factors, the current study spoke to the unique differences of these 11 professionals. Additionally, the literature spoke to the fact that while the role of self in the therapeutic alliance has been addressed, the self outside of therapy has not been researched (Fouad, 2003; Goodyear, et al., 2003).

The current study served to provide an in-depth look at how the early career psychologists navigates the multiple and complex tasks of decision-making and the developmental process that is taking place as the professional is discovering who they are as a professional and a person. Because this developmental process is very different than that of other professions, it is so important to focus on this population, furthering the research effort in the area of therapist development as well as contributing to training and applied practice.

To generalize from the decision-making process illustrated in the current model, the 11 early career psychologists who participated in this study on a global level are constructing their professional identity. They see the ways in which they have grown both professionally and personally as a result of going through this process. Some participants were very confident in their skills at this early stage, others still feel that there is much more to learn. Overall, it appears that having a perception of confidence allows the individual to feel good about his or her work in the profession and to continue to look for opportunities to grow professionally.

With the passage of time in addition to the feeling of satisfaction with one's professional decisions in light of the forces of reality and ideals, the early career psychologist will become more settled, and ultimately leave the phase of early career, transitioning into the "experienced professional phase" as described

in the literature (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). Situating development within the building metaphor that was described at the onset of this chapter, the transition to more experienced professional phase is best described as the “finishing” phase of professional identity construction and ultimately, moving into one’s professional identity.

Rather than ending this chapter with a summation of the customization model, please direct your attention to the following case examples that serve to illustrate the customization process in the lives of two early career psychologists, Michael and Martha. While their stories are different in many ways, they are similar in others. Their life experiences will be used to highlight the major tenets of the model and relate them in the first-hand, lived experiences of these two amazing and unique individuals.

### Case Studies

#### The Life of Michael

Michael’s passion for music from an early age was the flicker that grew into a flame of hope that one day he would leave his small town in the Midwest and “do something with his life.” At age 11, Michael resolved that his love for music and performing for others was his true calling. Music became the heartbeat of Michael’s life for the next 25 years. Michael’s love for music took on various forms throughout those years, from playing the piano in his local church to

performing in theatricals after college to teaching music in an elementary school. He swore that if he ever heard himself talking cynically about the teaching profession he would either change his profession or “shut up and suck it up.” The day arrived when he found himself saying things that he thought impossible for him to say. After spending a decade in the classroom, Michael had a vision of himself at age sixty singing stanza upon stanza of “Cuddle up Miss Sally” to a roomful of first graders. This was the point at which Michael began to question whether or not he wanted to retire as an elementary school music teacher. He decided to make a change in his life, a change that dramatically altered the course of his life.

At the time Michael contemplated making a career change, he had started taking classes for a masters degree. Because of his extensive background in music, Michael opted to pursue something that would help him better understand teaching styles and learning, which would translate into better teaching in his classroom. After starting the graduate classes, Michael realized “at thirty something that there was more than one thing that I was okay at.” Michael recalled that “although the masters degree was a way to move up the pay scale this turned into something much more than that. It turned into a new career.” After achieving his masters degree in educational psychology, Michael made one

of the most “significant decisions in my life,” the decision to go beyond the masters and pursue a doctorate in school psychology.

Schools were a place that he knew quite well, a setting that he felt very comfortable in, but were at the same time a stretch for Michael. Schools were a common thread that wove together his previous teaching experiences with this new learning endeavor. He was ready to have “his music be more of a personal pleasure rather than profession,” which helped make the transition back to school a welcome, but difficult change from the last 30 odd years of his life. Michael hoped that this endeavor “might be something that he could enjoy for a longer period of time and not burn out so quickly.” With “no regrets, but mixed emotions,” Michael began the next season of his life as a full-time doctoral student in school psychology. The year was 1997.

As Michael was a second career student, his experience was different from his classmates in many ways, both chronologically, because he started the program at 35, and in terms of life experiences. He remembered the first day of class as he looked out into the room and saw “all these babies who had gone straight through school right into Ph.D.” Michael remembered that he felt “absolutely terrified” because he was doing something “totally removed” from what he had been doing his entire working life. Michael became more comfortable as time passed with the help of his supervisors, but it was unclear

during the interviews whether Michael ever felt totally comfortable in graduate school. He reported that he second-guessed himself and the decisions that he made at different times throughout graduate school and internship. Michael found “validation” for his emerging professional skills in good grades that he received on “academic stuff, tests, and papers.” For him, this was a gauge of success and failure; good grades meant progress for Michael.

In addition to the transition to being in graduate school full-time, Michael also experienced a transition in his personal life. He decided to move in with his parents to “make ends meet” during graduate school. While this living arrangement was advantageous for Michael financially, it did not afford him the opportunity to pursue romantic relationships. Michael revealed that he is gay to friends and coworkers; however, he had not shared that with his parents. He felt his parents who were “very fundamental in their faith beliefs” would not understand his sexual orientation, thus he placed his desire for a romantic relationship on hold throughout the entirety of graduate school.

Michael also placed his passion for music on hold during graduate school. To make ends meet financially, Michael resorted to selling his pianos. His focus on ideals during graduate school prompted him to set goals to “give 110%” to the tasks of graduate school. The intense focus Michael maintained during graduate school affected his ability to attend to the forces of reality. In looking at

Michael's life, focusing on ideals allowed him to get through graduate school, using the all or nothing principle.

During graduate school and on internship, Michael never enjoyed his therapy classes, recalling that he never thought about working as a therapist because he "just didn't enjoy it." He felt like he had better things to do with his time than to "wait for someone to have their breakthrough." Michael indicated that he would never want to be in therapy, so why would he want to put someone else through that. His perception was that it "would be a painful experience on either end." He described his therapy style as behavioral, if he had to choose, and that he would never want anything to do with therapies that focused on "*process, process* and discovering your inner child."

Professionally, Michael prefers psychological assessment and the diagnostic aspects of psychology. He has an appreciation for the "actuarial nature of it" and the fact that it "isn't quite as touchy feely as therapy." Michael indicated that his personality lends itself more towards structure, which fits with assessment and that he gained an affinity for assessment by accident, namely because he didn't want to "do therapy." Conducting psychological assessments has allowed Michael find security in the "procedures that needed to be followed." After meeting for the first interview, Michael came to the realization that he tends

to “compartmentalize himself,” indicating that he “feels more like a counselor in his personal life,” which may be why he does not want to counsel professionally.

Michael graduated with his Ph.D. in school psychology in May of 2001. After graduation, Michael knew that he wanted to continue to stay in the schools. He felt comfortable in the context of the schools describing school people as “different than private sector people” and “warmer, seeming to try to a greater degree to make connections with the people around them.” Additionally, staying with the schools would allow him to gain more experience with assessment. Halfway through his internship year, he sought out his supervisor to talk about “next steps” whether or not the possibility existed to remain in the school district in which he had been working. He also connected with people in the Midwest to create other options and actually flew back to interview at a school district. He relied on the connections he had made during internship to secure his post-doctoral experience. Having moved from the Midwest to complete the internship, Michael decided that another move at that time was not practical and that staying in the area where he completed his internship “just made sense.” As for weighing the options, Michael was single and did not have any romantic relationships or children that were weighing in. He considered moving closer to his family, but at the time, Michael felt that he could visit them frequently enough without moving back to the same state. He also considered the fact that the position he was

considering allowed him to use his assessment skills and that the position he was going to take was one where he felt both comfortable and challenged professionally. The school district where he was working asked him to “hold on before making a decision because there’s going to be a job for you.” He trusted their verbal offer and after weighing the options, he accepted the position that they offered, to continue working in the same school district as a school psychologist.

In the summer of 2001, Michael began to settle into his position in the schools. Although Michael had worked in schools for many years as a teacher, he was now in a different professional capacity, working in the schools as a psychologist. As Michael settled into his job he wanted the other people that he worked with to know that he had received his Ph.D. Michael wanted the “best of everything.” Paying no attention to the force of finances, Michael proceeded to purchase the “best of everything” from the premium cable package to a new car, new home and all the home décor to go along with it. After a whirlwind of purchases in a very short time, Michael realized the financial ramifications of his decisions, several thousands of dollars of debt later. He described that right after starting his new job he felt like he “deserved” these things, that his hard work needed to be rewarded with material things, things that he had “earned” and had not been able to afford because he had made many sacrifices in graduate school.

In 2003, Michael was still trying to pay off the debt he accrued during that period of time.

The year 2002 was the year Michael began to feel settled in his current position. Michael had branched out by starting to work with the internship training program with the school district and had made a decision not to take any work home in the evenings. In the past, Michael had always taken home reports to write at night on the weekends, but no more! He wanted freedom to cultivate his friendships, with hopes of finding a romantic relationship. He indicated that he has not had a romantic relationship, “not even a date since 1997.” Setting boundaries with his free time has allowed Michael to become more active in the community and attend to the forces of reality that relate to relationships. In 2002, he got involved in a church for gay and lesbians in hopes of meeting someone. He started singing in the choir and rediscovered his passion for music. Going to church for Michael has been a way of “grounding him” personally and professionally, he felt that spirituality brought a sense of morality to what he does.

When Michael began settling into his job with the schools in 2002, the forces of reality and ideals appeared balanced. In that year, Michael was actively working to keep balance, attending to the forces of reality and working in his ideal environment. He was also challenging himself professionally by taking on new commitments at work.

By 2003, Michael started to have second thoughts. At the time of the second interview in September of 2003, Michael experienced something that unnerved him. He referred to the incident in a coarse joking manner as the “nametag incident of 2003.” He had received his nametag in the fall of 2003 and it read “administrative staff.” He felt this title was for the “clerks and janitors” and made it clear that he wanted his nametag changed. He indicated that he knew this was an “ego driven class issue” and that he was “okay with that.” His perception of the fact that he had been given an administrative staff nametag was that he was not valued as a psychologist. Michael was adamant about the fact that he wanted his nametag changed to reflect his title, “licensed psychologist.” After talking with six different people, his nametag was changed. While nothing really changed in terms of Michael’s position, his perception did; as he felt that changing his name tag meant he was “no longer a clerk or janitor.” He also reported frustration about how schools currently function and his beliefs about how schools should function. This bifurcation has contributed to Michael’s dissatisfaction with his current position. He has also had difficulty conforming to the politics of the school district. Ultimately, Michael would like to be “in a position that is governed by collective bargaining not dictated by the legislature.” His difficulty understanding the politics of how certain states run their schools with a sense of “dictatorship” has caused him to rethink his decision to stay in his

current position and perceive that he is no longer satisfied. Michael expressed some regret about his previous decision and is now actively looking to make a change. In his second interview Michael said, “I can’t work somewhere that I’m unheard and I’ve done it as long as I can do it.”

The force of family is also calling Michael home. His desire to be close to his family, particularly his parents who “are getting older” and his sister who recently had a baby, have motivated Michael to look for other options in school districts closer to home. The force of family calling him home coupled with his ideals about what kind of context he would like to be working in have caused him to reengage in the decision-making process of customization. At the time of the second interview, Michael had just told his immediate supervisor that he was looking to move back to the Midwest. Since then, he started calling friends in the area to try and create some options. Although Michael doesn’t know where he will end up, he is sure that he will be living closer to his family and will be in a committed romantic relationship. He indicated he wants to continue to work in the schools and perhaps do some private evaluations, “not private practice, just private evaluations.” As for future professional endeavors, once Michael settles in he may try out therapy but only if he works with gay and lesbian clients. He felt this was the one population he could relate to and counsel from the heart. At

this point, he hadn't totally ruled out counseling in the future..."well, distant future."

Michael's personal and professional experiences all contribute to the customization process. Michael's customization process included decisions he made as well as his thinking about these decisions and his feelings about a need for change. Michael has been in the process of constructing his professional identity with each new experience and new day that he continues in the profession of psychology.

#### The Life of Martha

Born overseas, Martha's sense of adventure was instilled in her from an early age. Growing up in the United States she decided to pursue her bachelor's degree in romance languages; the year was 1978. Although she majored in languages, Martha recalled that her first psychology class "hooked" her and served to shape her burgeoning interests in the mental health field and ultimately, in her career as a psychologist. When she graduated from college in 1983, Martha needed a job. Based on her "excitement about psychology" she decided to take a job working at a residential treatment center as direct care staff for inpatient adolescents. She said that she "loved it" and would have stayed there if it "weren't for the fact that they paid \$4.25 an hour." Although the pay increased over time, it was never enough for Martha to live on comfortably. The only way

to make more money at the treatment center was to take an administrative position, which meant “getting further and further away from the clients.” Not wanting to depart from her passion for work with children and adolescents, she decided to enter graduate school. Fueled by a fascination for understanding human behavior and wanting to make sense of who people are and who they become, Martha entered a counseling psychology program; the year was 1989.

Having worked in the field of mental health since the age of 23, Martha had a sense of what she wanted to focus on during graduate school. She knew she wanted to continue to work with adolescents with severe, mental health issues. She was drawn to the “mentally ill” and believed that this population was “underserved and under, understood” and that “the old fashion idea that such a person is not treatable” needed to change. When she got to graduate school, Martha recalled that the graduate program “gave the theoretical and intellectual underpinnings that made sense given what I had already figured out just based on life.” As Martha continued in graduate school she indicated that she began to “tap more intellect and less instinct” with the aid of “philosophically based classes” that helped her to question some of her own assumptions about what the “good life” really is. Martha indicated that graduate school helped her to move away from “just accepting assumptions and working at more of a superficial level, really kind of thinking about what I’m doing- less intuition and more brain.

Martha credited graduate school as a formative time in helping her to develop confidence and trust in her skills and abilities.

During her first two years of graduate school, Martha was having problems in her marriage, which ultimately ended in divorce. Martha turned to personal therapy to help her through this difficult time. She felt that her therapy experience was “instrumental” in helping her become more confident and less afraid of her strengths as well as refining her goal that she wanted to practice psychotherapy. Throughout Martha’s experience in therapy, her perception shifted from “a childish view that if something’s wrong in my world it must be my fault” to a more adult view of, “I wonder what I can do about this because this isn’t working right?” Martha continued to believe in the process of therapy, “wanting to learn how to do it and at the same time wanting some of it.” She felt like she “didn’t go to therapy to find out what it was like, I went to clear up some blockages in my life.”

Martha is the quintessential example of a person who attempted to maintain balance between the forces of reality and ideals during graduate school and thereafter. She recalled, “I think some people set their life aside and do graduate school and they then get out of graduate school and go back to their life and I didn’t do that.” Before the time Martha graduated she “got divorced, lived alone for awhile, remarried, had a few miscarriages, I had my babies, by the time

I finished my dissertation, pounds and pounds of life had passed and that was the way I wanted it to be.” For Martha:

Life and graduate school were all very intertwined and I didn’t slow graduate school down to do life and I didn’t slow life down to do graduate school and I was doing both of them at the same time and so, it wasn’t very clear to me how one thing would be a sole influence on how I developed because they were so intermingled- this is the way I do life.

Martha felt strongly about living in the moment- not putting her life on hold, feeling that “whatever I’m doing needs to be part of my life, and it’s always been my life.” Not only did these beliefs influence her experience during graduate school, they also set the precedent for how she would make decisions in the years to come.

Throughout graduate school, Martha also worked part-time at a halfway house for emotional disturbed youth. Martha’s strong feelings that she “didn’t want to take out loads of loans” coupled with the fact that she “didn’t have family support for school” prompted her decision to “keep it all going at the same time.” She was trying to balance work, her personal life, and school, all at the same time. Martha felt like she had a life when she started graduate school and she wanted to keep it that way. In hindsight, Martha felt like she “took it more to an extreme, I was the only one who actually had children before I was done.” Without regret,

Martha knew she took the longest time possible to finish the task. The process by which she arrived at psychologist was different than most. After nine years and a wealth of different and interesting experiences, Martha graduated with a Ph.D. in counseling psychology; the year was 1998.

After graduate school, Martha knew she wanted to work as a clinician. She had passion for clinical work that manifest itself early on during her training experiences and was confirmed during her own personal experience with psychotherapy during her divorce. Although she enjoyed the intellectualism of research she knew she would never become an academician, wanting instead to be a “consumer of academic material” rather than a contributor per se. She described therapy as “applying a mystery without even knowing what you do, it was very mysterious and intriguing..it was kind of exciting.” Seeing clients in therapy allowed Martha to realize she “had an ability to facilitate healing that I hadn’t really owned before.” She always knew that she “had an ability to soothe people or calm people or to contain people or to build relationships with difficult people but I didn’t see- the breadth of what therapy can be in me.” After Martha realized she “had the potential to help people in ways that were not exhausting or complicated or unique, and that it wasn’t hard,” she wanted to keep doing it! She knew that therapy was going to be the way she would “contribute to the field.”

Martha started looking for professional options that would allow her to do what she loved best: therapy.

While on internship, Martha established contacts at a local child guidance center to try and “get a foot in the door” before she actually needed a job. By the end of internship, Martha had already created an opportunity and even started working at the guidance center with the understanding that she would join the agency after she completed her internship year. She weighed the options that were best for her family. With two newborn babies and a husband in school, she had to choose an option that allowed her flexible hours and was located close to home so she would be available for her children. She indicated that her job at the guidance center was like “being at home.” She loved the job, loved the people she worked with, and felt that the work she was doing was very “fulfilling.” Having an ideal work environment allowed Martha to begin to use different clinical skills. She began working with clients in Spanish, something totally new that she had not done in the past. Her fondness for Spanish speakers along with the Hispanic culture in general kept Martha very interested and involved with this population.

Two years after taking the position at the guidance center, the forces of reality were calling Martha out of her ideal position. While she loved her work setting, the monetary compensation of nonprofit work was not enough to sustain

her family. To attend to the forces of reality she had to leave the position that she loved so much and had really settled into. She recalled:

I had to give up the illusion of work being fulfilling and more than just important. I feel like I am important to my clients and I feel like I am doing an important service. But I no longer have that feeling of being at home when I am in the office because I don't have, I am not surrounded by people that I feel homey with. And I feel like in making this move to earning more money and in the position of more prestige and all that stuff I gave up the possibility of working in that commune, in that communal type setting with a lot of warmth in it. And in my heart, I am not happy about that. But in my mind I feel that I made the right decision and the decision that everybody else would make, and the decision that is best for my family, and the decision that is best for vita...I can give you all the reasons why it's the best decision. But I miss that sense of being embedded in that part of the community. And I could work to recreate that, but I think I have a regret, the desire to kind of being cradled and you know, you can always... even though I became more mature at the guidance center and I see it as a developmental thing...when you become independent there is always a part of you that wants to go back home

again. And have Mom make you peanut butter sandwiches and I left that behind because it was time for me to grow up, but I miss it...

This quotation serves to illustrate that Martha had settled into her job; however, she was not able to settle into the profession in this context, namely because it was not adequately meeting the forces of reality. When she weighed her options, she knew she had to find a professional opportunity that would provide for her family and at the same time was something she felt good about doing. Her need to change positions based on the forces of reality resulted in a position that was ideal in terms of what looks best on her vita and met the needs of her family; however, she had some regret about leaving the position that truly was her “ideal” in terms of personal and professional interests and job satisfaction. Martha indicated that there will be times in the future that she can put her needs first, but now is not the time. This time in her life is a time where her professional desires and ideals come second to the force of family and the positions she chooses for the time being will be dictated by those forces of reality in her life.

When asked where Martha sees herself in five years, she replied with “I’m not sure.” She has contemplated working with the schools, as a position with the schools would allow her to have a similar schedule to her children. Martha sensed that a change in jobs would be in store, but isn’t sure what it looks like at this time. One day at a time, Martha will continue to strive to maintain a balance

between the forces of reality and her ideals; making changes dictated primarily by the forces of reality at this point in her life and weighing options that will best meet the forces. Martha does appear to be settling into the profession, having settled into a job at the guidance center with high satisfaction, to starting another position as the clinical director of another nonprofit program where she is using different parts of herself in being the “boss” in many ways. These different positions have challenged Martha in unique ways and can be seen as contributing to the customization of her professional identity.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The current study provided a unique glimpse into the lives of early career psychologists in hopes of portraying the complexities of a process that research has just begun to explore within the last decade (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). As the student leaves the context of graduate school and related training experiences, his or her professional career is at hand. This time in life is critical for the emerging professional as he or she is faced with a multitude of decisions. At the onset of this study, the researcher set out to take an in-depth look at the influential personal and professional factors that were most notable in the lives of recently licensed psychologists. As the interviews progressed, participants continued to mention the various decisions that they were making during their transition from student to professional. Personal and professional factors were found to be influential in terms of how early career psychologists approached decisions regarding personal and occupational endeavors. Because each individual deals with unique personal and professional factors that relate to his or her life, this time in the life of the professional became known as *customization* because the professional decisions were being “customized” in accordance with the individualized professional and personal factors in one’s life. The professional factors were defined as ideals (professional interests, characteristics

of self, and goals) and the personal factors became known as the forces of reality (relationships, finances, and health issues).

Most of the existing research studies in the area of therapist development refer to early career psychologists as “novice professionals” who are at the beginning of constructing their professional identities (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). The current study offers a different picture, finding that early career psychologists are more than “novice professionals.” In fact, the study found that the customization process is actually situated in the middle of professional identity construction. Findings indicated that professional identity construction begins with one’s decision to enter graduate school. At that point, the student begins to work through the various stages of identity construction including: understanding the “blueprint” of graduate school; laying a solid foundation through didactic coursework; and framing, which involves learning from more-skilled others and developing clinical skills. The current study found that the professional foundation has been laid during graduate school and throughout professional training experiences, such that early career psychologists have made tremendous gains towards becoming professionals. Thus, the term “novice” does not adequately reflect the number of years spent in training and in professional contexts throughout training and pre-licensure experiences. While early career psychologists have recently entered the

professional realm of independently exercising their newly developed skills, they are no longer novices to the profession.

Deciding on a professional position and the subsequent settling into the position that occurs is a difficult process for any psychologist. The difficulty of making such decisions is compounded for early career psychologists who do not actively attend to their relationships, finances, and health throughout graduate school. This was the case for some of the participants in the current study. Such participants were focused on giving 110% to the “ideals” of training, which left them with little time to deal with their relationships, finances, and even their own health issues. The fact that the personal lives of graduate students has not received significant attention in the literature is largely due to the fact that the majority of studies in the area of therapist development have studied this phenomenon through the lens of supervision, which tends to favor addressing professional issues over personal growth (Hogan, 1953; Loganbill et al., 1982; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Stoltenberg et al., 1998). In such studies, personal growth is seen as cursory, brought into the supervision hour in such times where personal issues appear to interfere with professional therapeutic practice (Hogan, 1953; Loganbill et al., 1982; Stoltenberg et al., 1998). As previous studies have placed importance on supervision, client experiences, and personal life experiences as primary pathways to development for the therapist, the current

study sought to understand whether or not participants perceived such factors to be important. Commensurate with previous studies, participants in the current study noted client experiences and personal life experiences as pathways that facilitated professional identity construction. The data from the current study speak to the fact that although psychologists may question their emerging skills and confidence level, client experiences are the antidote for alleviating anxiety, with experiential learning and training activities “on the job” being instrumental in facilitating professional growth.

Interestingly, participants in the current study did *not* endorse supervision as one of the primary pathways to the construction of professional identity. The current study found that while supervision was reported to provide participants with tools to use in therapeutic encounters, it failed to explicitly address the personal needs (forces of reality) of the participants in conjunction with their professional interests and goals (ideals). The data revealed that there is a perceived power differential that exists within the supervisory relationship that results in a stifling of personal issues on behalf of the psychologist-in-training that prevents him or her from bringing issues into the supervisory hour that would not “meet the approval” of the supervisor. Results from the current study found such approval orientations to supervision prevent students from attending to the forces of reality, with professional ideals overriding personal development. This can be

detrimental for the fledgling psychologist particularly because of the fact that understanding both entities is integral to the heart and soul of psychology as a profession. When participants reported that supervision had contributed to their professional identity construction, the qualities and characteristics of the supervisor were described in detail, as well as the personal relationships and issues that the individual was able to address within the context of supervision. Participants who endorsed supervision as having contributed to their professional development indicated that their supervisors encouraged the psychologist-in-training to think about personal relationships as well as formulate their ideals and begin to actualize ideals through the creation of professional training experiences.

#### Implications for Training

The current study holds important implications for the implementation of supervision and didactic training in graduate programs. Research findings revealed that early career psychologists are largely shaped and influenced by their experiences in graduate school. Existing graduate programs assume that the forces of reality that are impinging upon a student's personal life will be navigated on one's own. If supervision were designed to focus more on understanding the role of the forces of reality in the lives of students, they would have the opportunity to begin to integrate their personal and professional identities throughout their training experiences. Training programs would emerge

that are tailored to meet individual needs based not only on curriculum requirements but also on what is germane to students. To do this effectively, it would be integral that current supervisory relationships move away from the belief that personal issues in supervision fall secondary to professional issues in supervision. Adopting this perspective could allow supervisors to incorporate forces of reality as a primary component of the supervisory hour, rather than relegating such personal issues to “small talk” at the beginning or end of supervision. This is not to suggest that part of supervision should become “therapy” for the student; rather this focus on personal issues is important as it relates to the student’s professional development. By knowing more about the student’s goals, hopes, and desires for practice as well as his or her personal relationships, a more accurate and comprehensive conceptualization of his or her development can be attained, and thus, the negative avenues of professional development such as incompetence, burnout, impairment, and disillusionment can be arrested (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003)

While supervision is one aspect of graduate training that can incorporate personal and professional issues, it is one of many. At the time students make the decision to enter graduate school, the current study found that often students do not realize the forces of reality that are operating in their lives. Thus, they would benefit from the guidance and assistance of other professionals with more

experience to help them identify forces of reality, professional interests, and goals to accomplish during graduate school. Such advising sessions could employ a variety of measures including: interviews; open-ended questions; and questionnaires assessing personality style, locus of control, motivation, coping skills, and professional interest. Such measures would provide a snapshot of the forces of reality in the life of the student and his or her professional interests and self-characteristics that would facilitate placement in practicum settings and training opportunities as students begin to lay a solid foundation throughout graduate training. Incorporating “advising sessions” early on in graduate training, with scheduled follow-up sessions could help to set the course of customization earlier on in training, rather than upon completion of graduate school.

Colloquia to address professional issues during early years of training could provide another opportunity for students to have candid discussions with their peers as well as faculty about what it means to be a psychologist, the reality of balancing personal and professional issues and what is involved in the process of becoming a psychologist. Creating this awareness will help students understand what is involved, what is expected of them, and what lies ahead. While some graduate training programs have implemented didactic training of this nature, it appears that it is not consistent across training programs. For many of the participants, there was an uncertainty as they forged out into the

professional world after graduate school. Learning opportunities such as these would provide a safe haven to learn more about what lies ahead.

### Implications for Practice

The current study found that few participants had developed any mentor relationships upon leaving graduate school. Mentoring programs and partnerships with professionals in the field could provide this type of support to early career professionals. Mentor relationships would serve two functions: to help the individual create options through having a connection; and to provide professional support in the form of another person who is experienced at dealing with a myriad of professional issues and the forces of reality. The mentor may be present in the life of the early career psychologist for a short time until he or she is settled into the position and begins settling into the profession. Also, the mentor could serve an important function throughout one's career as a person to connect and reconnect with at different points and phases throughout the duration of professional identity construction.

Because of the fact that an enormous amount of time is spent completing the doctorate and requirements for licensure, it would be advantageous for continuity to be enhanced between the framing phase of professional identity construction and customization. A good example of such continuity is seen in the business world. In this discipline, connections are facilitated during graduate

training and students are linked with people who have similar professional interests in practice or may be located geographically in an area that the emerging professional will be settling into. Psychology would benefit from adopting such practices of related disciplines given the importance of connections as identified by the current study. Such relationships would allow early career psychologists to have a sense of available options sooner, which would allow for them to weigh such options and begin settling subsequently thereafter. This would be ideal for the early career psychologist, eliminating the need to further compound the forces of reality with the additional stress of having to create one's own connections completely independent of any supports during early customization. If such programs were developed, it is expected that early career psychologists who engage in this experience will become part of this dynamic process and these professionals will reciprocate by giving back to other early career psychologists who are beginning customization after graduate school.

While the current study indicates that customization begins after graduate school, by no means do the results suggest that the process ends here. Understanding that the construction of professional identity is a lifelong process, the current research effort touched on the tip of the iceberg of what lies ahead for the early career psychologist. Because this developmental process is life long, professional identity construction will continue to evolve as the individual

continues to experience increases in competence and mastery. As no experience occurs in a vacuum, we are all influenced by and reciprocally influence our surroundings. Given the fact that this study took place after September 11<sup>th</sup> at the beginning of war times, some participants mentioned the effect of the changing social and political climate of the United States and the effect that the current state of affairs in the world has had on the forces of reality in their lives, particularly their perspective towards family and loved ones. The changing state of the world has also had an effect on ideals for professional practice and considerations for therapeutic work. In light of these events, future research efforts looking at the larger social context more explicitly could view how these changing political times affect development and the importance one places on career development in light of the state of affairs of the nation.

Inherent to the practice of psychology is the reality that this profession is not context free. Therapeutic encounters are always placed within the context of several individuals' ideals and forces of reality- those of the client and the psychologist at the very least. Having an independent license to practice psychology allows for a freedom to decide how one wants to use his or her degree and what he or she would like to do within the professional practice of psychology. As this is a unique and individualized process, this is the point at which customization becomes increasingly salient for early career psychologists

as far as how the psychologist wants to independently practice within the profession in the real world. It is important for early career psychologists to acknowledge the factors that are driving their professional decisions, both personally and professionally. Doing this will facilitate an awareness of one's motivation for practice and keep the early career psychologist focused rather than getting steered off course.

#### Limitations and Future Directions for Research

An inherent feature of qualitative research is the fact that there are a limited number of participants. While this type of study provides richness in terms of participants' experiences through interviews, only a few participants could be included in the study. The chosen sample was selected based on their availability to participate in the study, the fact that they were willing to participate in a study examining their personal and professional development. Thus, it is difficult to assume that this sample represents all early career psychologists. Although theoretical sampling was ensured (Guba, 1981), it is likely that more experiences could have been captured if a larger sample had been used.

In the selected group of participants, 10 out of the 11 participants were of Caucasian descent, yielding a relatively homogeneous sample in terms of cultural differences. Because this particular sampling of psychologists was largely homogeneous in terms of cultural background, an area of further inquiry that

would add dimension to the current findings might include early career psychologists from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. A study of this nature would provide a richness of experiences and contextual relevance for different cultural and ethnic groups. Secondly, because the participants were largely drawn from the same regional area, namely, an urban, southwestern context, it would be interesting for future inquiries to explore whether or not geographic location yielded differences in the perceptions of forces of reality and ideals. Furthermore, the current study did not examine the socioeconomic background of the eleven participants and the effect that these backgrounds have on the forces of reality, particularly in the area of finances. It would be interesting to look at the socioeconomic backgrounds of students who enter graduate training, and the effect that financial stability or lack of stability has on the forces of reality and ideals in future research endeavors.

The current study did not examine the graduate training programs of each participant. In light of the fact that the professional foundation is laid during the graduate school experience, it would be interesting for future inquiries to explore how differences in training programs impact customization. Finally, because this study was cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, the model was able to look at a period of the early career psychologist's life. As such, the model addresses one phase of professional identity construction: customization. Future research

directions in this area might include longitudinal studies that examine the developmental progression of customization across the totality of psychologists' professional careers. Such studies could explore how long customization lasts, as well as whether or not other processes exist within customization that the current study did not address.

The current model portrays an important decision-making process for early career psychologists who have completed graduate training within the last two to six years. With time and additional years of experience, it is unclear what other factors may influence customization. Will these factors continue to be salient later on? What other factors might be germane in later years of customization? It is difficult to ascertain from the current study how long the customization phase will last and when "finishing" will begin. Thus, while the current study is now "finished," it has opened a door to begin a new phase of construction in continuing to investigate this multi-faceted and complex phenomenon for years to come.

Appendix A  
Information Letter

## Appendix A

### *Information Letter*

Greetings!

I am currently conducting a study to try and better understand the experiences of recently licensed psychologists who have who have recently entered the work force after completing graduate training and related training experiences, such as internship and the post-doctoral residency.

I am asking for your help with this study. As a psychologist, you probably know that a lot has been written about the client populations that we serve, but not as much has been written about those that are invested in helping clients and their own personal and professional experiences in learning how to help others. One of my goals, by hearing from you is to begin to change this. I hope to learn from your perspective, as someone that has gone through the training process and is working in the field as a practicing clinician, what factors that have contributed to your development, both personally and professionally. I would also like to be able to better understand in what ways clinical work with children and adolescents contributed to your development.

Participating in this study will involve two face-to-face interviews at a time that is convenient for you at the location of your choosing. The interviews will last approximately an hour to an hour and a half. In addition to helping others, you may find the interview to be an interesting and illuminating experience for yourself. It should allow you to review your own story from a new perspective, and reflect on some of the ideas you have about your experiences.

My name is Nicole Fitzpatrick and I am a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin, Department of Educational Psychology. Please call me upon receipt of this letter and I will set up a time for your interview, in addition to answering any questions you might have about the study. My number is (512) 560-9608.

The faculty sponsor for this project is Professor Deborah Tharinger. If you would like to ask her any questions about the study, she can be reached at (512) 471-4407.

I look forward to meeting you.

Nicole Fitzpatrick

Appendix B  
Background Questionnaire

Appendix B

*Background Questionnaire*

**BACKGROUND**

Name

Contact Number & E-mail:

Marital Status:

Ethnicity:

Date and Place of Birth:

**EDUCATION**

Graduate Work

What is the name of the university/institution where you completed your graduate training?

What was the name of your department and graduate program?

When did you begin graduate training? When did you graduate?

What was your Department's Training Model (circle one)

Clinical Scientist

Practitioner-Scholar

Scientist-Practitioner

Practitioner

Other - specify: @

(e.g. Developmental, Specialty, Local Clinical Scientist)

What was the designated subfield (s) of your doctorate in Psychology?  
(Circle choices):

Clinical (adult track)

Health

Clinical (child track)

Neuropsychology

Clinical (general)

School

Counseling

Respecialization Program

Developmental

Combined (Specify: @)

Educational

Other (Specify: @)

Previous Academic Work

What degrees have you completed in any mental health field?

(Circle and specify the area of study next to the degree)

Ph.D.

M.S.W.

B.A. / B.S.

Psy.D.

M.A. / M.S.

Ed.S.

Ed.D.

B.S.W.

Other (Specify: @)

When did you complete the above degree?

Please complete the following table for each undergraduate and graduate school or university attended: (list in chronological order)

School / University	Major	Degree Earned	Dates of Attendance
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### **INTERNSHIP AND POST-DOC**

Describe the setting where you completed your internship?

What type of agency was it and what populations were served?

List your primary role(s) at the agency

Describe the setting where you completed your post-doc?

What type of agency was it and what population (s) were served?

List your primary role(s) in the agency?

In what month and year did you complete the licensing examinations?

### **PROFESSIONAL WORK**

What is your primary theoretical orientation? (Put an "X" next to only one choice)

Behavioral	Integrative
Biological	Interpersonal
Cognitive Behavioral	Eclectic
Psychodynamic/Psychoanalytic	Systems
Humanistic/Existential	Other (Specify: @)

Describe the types of settings have you worked with children and adolescents?

What type of setting are you currently working in and why did you choose this setting?

Consider a typical week for you, how much of your clinical work is dedicated to therapy with children and adolescents? What types of professional activities (research, supervision, etc.) are you engaged in?

Appendix C  
Consent Form

## Appendix C

### *Consent Form*

#### Personal and Professional Development of Recently Licensed Psychologists

You are invited to participate in a study exploring the personal and professional development of psychologists. My name is Nicole Fitzpatrick and I am a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, Department of Educational Psychology. This study will be the basis for my dissertation research. I hope to learn more about the personal and professional development of psychologists who practice psychotherapy with children and adolescents. I am interested in your perception of the key experiences and events that have influenced your personal and professional development.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to partake in an interview about your perception of your personal and professional development. I will also contact you for a follow-up interview at the time of your choosing. Both interviews will be audiotaped.

During the interview, I will ask you to share stories that best describe your development as a psychologist. It is anticipated that there will be no risk or discomfort to you in participating in the research. You may find participation to be valuable as you share with me the stories about your development. Should you feel uncomfortable at any time, you may decline to respond to any questions you would prefer not to answer and you reserve the right to discontinue the interview at any time.

Upon completion of the interviews, each audiotape will be coded and your name will not be linked with this tape. Be assured that at no time will your name be revealed. The information you provide will be identified by a pseudonym of your choosing. Your confidentiality will be maintained and respected throughout the process of the research. The tapes will be kept under close supervision throughout the duration of the study. The primary investigator will be the only person who will know your name. I may use excerpts from your interview in written materials resulting from this study, but they will never be presented in a way that would identify you. At the conclusion of the study, the tapes will be destroyed, and the transcripts and other data will be kept for future analyses.

Your decision whether or not to participate in this research study will not affect your future relations with the University of Texas at Austin, any other agency or program with which you are affiliated, or with the person who referred you for this study. If you decide to participate, you reserve the right to discontinue your participation at any time throughout the interview. You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time after signing this form, should you choose to discontinue participation in the study.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask me. If you have any additional questions later, you may call me, Nicole Fitzpatrick, MA, Investigator (512-560-9608) or Deborah Tharinger, Ph.D., Faculty Sponsor (512-471-4407).

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Signature of Participant

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Date

---

Signature of Investigator

---

Date

*You have my permission to audiotape our interview*

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

Appendix D  
Interview Guide

## Appendix D

### *Interview Guide*

#### *Beginning the Interview*

Decision to enter the field of psychology?

#### *Possible Inquiry Topics*

View of professional development

Changes throughout graduate school

Changes during internship

Changes during post-doctoral residency

Changes and Reflections from licensure to now

View of personal development

Changes throughout graduate school

Changes during internship

Changes during post-doctoral residency

Changes and Reflections from licensure to now

Factors leading to development

What?

When?

How?

Work with children and adolescents

Impact on professional development

Impact on personal development

#### *Ending the Interview*

Reflections – surprises, challenges, or victories that were unexpected

What was it like talking about your development today?

Table 1  
Stages Of Professional Development

Table 1: Stages Of Professional Development

Stages of Professional Development (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992)							
<i>Conventional</i>	<i>Transition to Professional Training</i>	<i>Imitation of Experts</i>	<i>Conditional Autonomy</i>	<i>Exploration</i>	<i>Integration</i>	<i>Individuation</i>	<i>Integration</i>
<i>Time Period of Stage:</i>							
<i>Prior to formal training</i>	<i>First year of graduate school</i>	<i>Middle of graduate school</i>	<i>Internship 6 mo – 2 years</i>	<i>New graduate 2-5 years</i>	<i>2-5 years</i>	<i>10-30 years</i>	<i>30+ years</i>
<i>Primary activity:</i>							
<i>Using what you already know</i>	<i>Assimilate info. from many sources</i>	<i>Maintain openness while imitating experts</i>	<i>Function as a professional</i>	<i>Explore beyond the known</i>	<i>Developing authenticity</i>	<i>More authentic</i>	<i>Preparing for retirement</i>
<i>Predominant affect:</i>							
<i>Sympathy</i>	<i>Enthusiasm and insecurity</i>	<i>Bewilderment later calm</i>	<i>Temporal confidence</i>	<i>Confidence &amp; anxiety</i>	<i>Satisfaction &amp; hope</i>	<i>Satisfaction &amp; distress</i>	<i>Acceptance</i>
<i>Sources of influence:</i>							
<i>One's personal life</i>	<i>Many interacting new &amp; old data bases</i>	<i>Supervisors, clients theory/ research, peers</i>	<i>Supervisors, clients and personal</i>	<i>New data base – professional work setting</i>	<i>Self as professional – elder as influence</i>	<i>Accumulated wisdom</i>	<i>Early influences internalized</i>
<i>Role and working style:</i>							
<i>Sympathetic friend</i>	<i>Uncertainty Struggling to fit practice w/ theory</i>	<i>Uncertain Rigid mastery of basics</i>	<i>Increased rigidity in profess. Role</i>	<i>Modifying externally imposed professional style</i>	<i>Mix of ext. imposed rigidity and int. imposed “loosening”</i>	<i>Oneself w/ professional boundaries</i>	<i>Oneself</i>
<i>Measures of Effectiveness:</i>							
<i>Usually assumed, not of concern</i>	<i>Client improvement Supervisor reaction</i>	<i>Client feedback Supervisor reaction</i>	<i>Complex view of client feedback</i>	<i>More realistic &amp; internalized criteria</i>	<i>Increasingly realistic &amp; internalized criteria</i>	<i>Realistic &amp; internal</i>	<i>Profoundly internal &amp; realistic</i>

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## VITA

Nicole Danyon Fitzpatrick was born on March 15, 1975, in Riverside, California, the daughter of Bruce Gay and Bobbi Caldwell. Due to her father's architectural career, Nicole attended schools in several different national locations. After graduating high school in 1992 from Redlands High School in Redlands, California, she attended the University of California at Riverside. Nicole was selected for the psychology honors program and completed an undergraduate honors thesis entitled *The Phenomenology of Dysphoric Rumination*. She received the Presidential Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Research for her research endeavors and graduated with her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology in 1996. Following graduation, Nicole taught special education for one year. During that year, she co-authored two articles published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. She has been enrolled in the Department of Educational Psychology's School Psychology Program at the University of Texas at Austin since the fall of 1997. In December of 2000, she married John David Fitzpatrick of Austin, Texas. Nicole received her Master of Arts from the University of Texas at Austin in December of the same year. In 2002, Nicole and her husband moved to Dallas, Texas where she completed her pre-doctoral internship in school psychology at the Salesmanship Club Youth and Family Centers in Dallas, Texas. She successfully completed her internship in August 2003 and continues to reside in Dallas, Texas with her husband and two dogs, Bernie and Lexi.

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This dissertation was typed by the author.