Becoming an Advocate: Processes and Outcomes of a Relationship-Centered Advocacy Training Model

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Abstract
Counseling programs across the country are increasingly incorporating social justice advocacy training into their curricula. However, much remains to be learned about the developmental processes by which students develop advocacy skills and apply those skills after they graduate. To address these questions and drive further innovation in the field of advocacy training, we conducted an evaluation of the Community Advocacy Project, a yearlong microlevel advocacy training model that teaches mental health counseling master’s students to use relationship-centered advocacy with individuals in marginalized communities. We interviewed 19 counselors within 2.5 years of their graduation from the project about their experiences of the program and their current advocacy work. Using qualitative description, we developed a model describing processes of Internal Grappling, Building the Advocacy Relationship, and Integrating the Advocate Identity that highlights the importance of a yearlong one-on-one advocacy relationship, intensive reflection and supervision, and community collaboration.

Keywords
multiculturalism, social justice, training, qualitative, advocacy

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Over the last 20 years, social justice has become a guiding value in counseling psychology, triggering innovations in research, intervention, and training (Baranowski et al., 2016). Indeed, some have called social justice the “fifth force” in counseling (Ratts, 2009). Given that so many communities in the United States and around the world continue to experience trauma and distress in response to social, political, and cultural oppression, addressing systems of oppression directly at individual, community, and sociopolitical levels is crucial (Ali & Sichel, 2014; Goodman, Pugach, Skolnick, & Smith, 2013).

Counseling psychologists have shown tremendous creativity in their efforts to bring social justice advocacy into graduate curricula (see the two-part special issue of *The Counseling Psychologist*, Koch & Juntunen [2014a, 2014b] for an array of examples). As we will show, however, only a few of these endeavors have been evaluated. Instructors still know little about the developmental processes by which trainees become advocates or what role advocacy training plays in shaping social justice perspectives (Koch & Juntunen, 2014c). Even less is known about outcomes of the process for students one or two years beyond the training itself. Without such knowledge, graduate programs are hampered in their ability to refine and expand their training models. To address these knowledge gaps, we explored processes and outcomes of the Community Advocacy Project (CAP), a yearlong micro-level advocacy training model that teaches mental health counseling master’s students to use relationship-centered advocacy in their work with individuals and families from marginalized communities. First, we review relevant scholarship on graduate training in social justice advocacy to identify potential key ingredients of training programs. Next, we describe the CAP model, emphasizing its focus on relationships. Finally, we present the results of a qualitative analysis of advocates’ experiences with CAP and the extent to which this training shaped their professional identities.

**Models for Teaching Social Justice Advocacy in Graduate Programs**

*Social justice advocacy* refers to actions taken to facilitate the removal of external barriers to opportunity and well-being (Toporek & Liu, 2001). Training programs in microlevel advocacy, that is, advocacy at the individual and family levels, range from short-term immersion projects (Koch, Ross, Wendell, & Aleksandrova-Howell, 2014; Toporek & Worthington, 2014) to semester-long supervised experiences (Stewart-Sicking, Snodgrass, Pereira, Mutai, & Crews, 2013). Most training models facilitate intensive critical reflection to help students deepen their awareness of how their own social locations confer power or disempowerment and how hierarchies of privilege
maintain social injustice (Ali & Sichel, 2014; Moe, Perera-Dilitz, & Sepulveda, 2010; Toporek & Worthington, 2014). Most training programs also focus on specific populations (e.g., refugees, international school children, homeless adults) (Koch & Juntunen, 2014c; Nilsson, Schale, & Khamphakdy-Brown, 2011; Toporek & Worthington, 2014). Some emphasize development of specific skill sets such as job coaching or psychoeducational outreach (Ali & Lees, 2013; Midgett & Doumas, 2016). Despite this variability, most share a focus on teaching students to (a) identify systemic obstacles to well-being, (b) help community members harness their own strengths and resources for confronting those obstacles, and (c) work collaboratively to gain access to the resources needed to improve well-being (Goodman, Vilbas, & Bell, 2014; Green, McCollum, & Hays, 2008). Missing from many accounts of social justice advocacy training, however, is systematic attention to using the relationship between advocates and their partners as a vehicle for accomplishing the intended goals. The CAP shares with other models the general tenets just described, but it also highlights implementation of such strategies within the context of the one-on-one relationship between advocates and their “partners.” (We use the term “partner” rather than “client” to indicate the mutual learning that occurs in this relationship.)

The CAP coordinators pair mental health counseling master’s students with one or two partners each, with whom they work over the course of a year, using the Relationship-Centered Advocacy model that two of the authors (L. G. and J. H.) have developed over the last decade (Goodman, Glenn, Bohlig, Banyard, & Borges, 2009). Relationship-centered advocacy builds on a broad set of principles for doing social justice work in counseling psychology that emphasizes the role of the authentic and genuine relationship as a springboard for developing shared goals, identifying a plan of action, and collaborating on systemic change. Similar to Ali and Sichel’s (2014) concept of “anti-oppression advocacy,” trainees in the Relationship-Centered Advocacy model also learn to address their partners’ difficulties in ways that match each partner’s priorities and goals by listening carefully, providing emotional support, and helping to identify and navigate relevant systems. To guide the relationship building and systems navigation required by this model, students receive supervision in a variety of forms from faculty, doctoral students, and/or staff from partner agencies. Overall, this structure is consistent with Caldwell and Vera’s (2010) exploration of critical training experiences for strengthening students’ social justice orientation, including direct exposure to social injustice in the context of community-based work; coursework, reading, and scholarship on social justice and injustice; and opportunities for reflection on students’ social locations and role in oppression.
Social Justice Advocacy Training as Identity Development

A small but growing body of mainly qualitative research has investigated graduate student perceptions of the effects of social justice advocacy training. Several of these studies documented positive outcomes of such programs. Koch et al. (2014), for example, explored the experiences of nine master’s and doctoral graduate students enrolled in a service learning course offered in Belize and found that students emerged with greater appreciation of diversity, more highly developed counseling skills and multicultural competence, and increased self-awareness, insight, and motivation. Similarly, Nilsson et al. (2011) interviewed 12 counseling master’s and doctoral students conducting psychoeducational workshops, home visits, and/or counseling with refugee and other immigrant women, and found that the students described greater cultural knowledge, counseling-related skills, and personal growth as an outcome of their participation in the program.

Several other studies investigated the processes by which students develop social justice competencies: Goodman et al. (2014), for example, explored the experiences of eight master’s-level counseling students who volunteered at three community sites and received supervision based on liberation psychology principles (Martín-Baró, 1994). Participants reported that their growth throughout the program was a direct outcome of challenges to preconceived notions; exposure to cultural differences; and strong emotional engagement with partners, resulting in both positive and negative emotional reactions. Finally, Stewart-Sicking et al. (2013) developed a grounded theory of the process and effects of service learning among 76 graduate counseling students enrolled in a community counseling course, about half of whom engaged in community work. Their model emphasized a four-step process of connecting with clients, becoming overwhelmed, adjusting expectations, and reconstructing their counselor identity.

A close reading of these studies revealed a set of common themes; no matter the nature of the program, participants across studies reported (a) a variety of intense feelings, both negative (e.g., disequilibrium, anxiety, frustration, fear, shock, anger, exhaustion) and positive (e.g., a sense of connection with their client/partner, appreciation for the people with whom they were working, a sense of personal reward and self-efficacy); (b) a range of new skills related to counseling and advocacy, including working with clients outside the office and developing competencies for engaging with systems; (c) cognitive shifts such as a reevaluation of assumptions about the focal group, greater awareness of their own relative privilege, and greater knowledge about how social injustice operates; and (d) dramatic growth in their commitment to fighting social injustice.
Notably, these findings are consistent with several theories of identity development, including feminist identity development, racial identity development, and the broader theory of transformative learning. The strong emotional reactions students in these studies experienced are common to early stages of the various identity models. For example, the feminist identity development model includes a stage of revelation wherein women are confronted with the reality of sexism and experience anger as a result (Erchull et al., 2009). Relatedly, both White and person of color racial identity models include a developmental status characterized by shock, confusion, and anxiety (i.e., disintegration in the White identity model and dissonance in the person of color model; Helms, 1995). Similarities persist at the other end of such models as well; the cognitive shifts and renewed commitments reflected in the social justice advocacy training literature are represented in later stages of both feminist and racial identity development models. Feminist models culminate in synthesis and active commitment stages that entail integrating feminist identity with other aspects of identity and committing to feminist social change work (Erchull et al., 2009). The autonomy and integrative awareness racial identity statuses also reflect themes of active commitment to racial humanism and resistance to conditions of oppression in society across social identities (Helms, 1995). Given these parallels, it is possible that social justice advocacy training may be tapping into the same processes that drive identity development.

These social justice advocacy training approaches and the identity development models they parallel are also consistent with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000). This broad perspective on adult education lays out a process of learning that results in deep and lasting change characterized by increased critical self-awareness of both self and other, and new perspectives and commitments, similar to the models just described (Stevens-Long, Schapiro, & McClintock, 2012). The steps involved in transformative learning include a disorienting dilemma that triggers negative emotional reactions; critical reflection and exploration of new roles; acquisition of new knowledge, skills, and competence necessary to enact those roles; and a reintegration of one’s identity based on one’s new skills and awareness (Mezirow, 2000). Taken together with the feminist and racial identity development models, it is possible to conceptualize effective social justice advocacy training as a kind of transformative identity developmental process.

These findings provided a fertile starting point for the questions we posed in the current study, but left many research gaps to be filled. Except for the work of Stewart-Sicking et al. (2013), researchers have yet to create a conceptual model of student processes and outcomes that systematically links together the range of experiences and outcomes they report; and the latter study was based on a semester-long training model in which only some of the
students worked in the community, and none used a relationship-centered advocacy model. Moreover, almost nothing is known about how program alumni a year or more beyond their advocacy training understand the role of that training in shaping their subsequent development as professionals, despite the emphasis on commitment to action in the literature. The present study aimed to fill this gap. We used a qualitative descriptive methodology (Neergaard, Olesen, Andersen, & Sondergaard, 2009; Sandelowski, 2000) to develop a rich and comprehensive picture of the processes and outcomes of the CAP from the perspective of its alumni.

**Method**

Qualitative description was the best methodological approach to explore CAP processes and outcomes because it aims to provide a straightforward description of the phenomenon in the language of participants and is especially useful for assessing, developing, and refining interventions (Sullivan-Bolyai, Bova, & Harper, 2005). Although interpretation is inevitably part of the process, interpretations remain fairly “data-near” (Sandelowski, 2010, p. 79), as compared to alternative qualitative approaches such as grounded theory or phenomenological inquiry. Given the paucity of research on social justice advocacy training and the need for practical and useful models that illuminate advocates’ processes and outcomes, this approach seemed particularly appropriate.

**Participants and Setting**

To identify and recruit former advocates, we used purposive sampling, a technique that involves identifying and selecting participants who are knowledgeable about, or experienced with, the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2013). Our goal was to continue to interview and conduct data analysis simultaneously until we reached theoretical saturation (i.e., the point when new data did not add categories or themes to our findings; Milne & Oberle, 2005; Morrow, 2007).

All participants in the study had served as CAP advocates during the first of a 2-year master’s program. Although all first year students in our master’s program learn basic counseling skills, largely through labs that emphasize role-playing, only 16 to 20 students have the opportunity to become CAP advocates as a noncredit, volunteer experience that supplements their regular counseling skills labs. In the process of joining the CAP program, students are required to write an essay and participate in in-person interviews. It is always competitive, with fewer slots than trainees who want to participate.
Although CAP has partnered with a number of community organizations over the years, our current community partners include a local high school comprised of predominantly low-income students of color and a local domestic violence agency that serves a diverse group of low-income survivors and their families. Students can request the setting they would prefer but are not guaranteed one or the other placement. The two faculty members who developed CAP work with the partner organizations to pair advocates and their partners based on a host of factors, including shared language and available time windows.

Advocates and partners meet weekly for 1 to 3 hr throughout the academic year at the partners’ respective community organizations or at a location that works for both parties. During their meetings, advocates develop a relationship with their partners, help them discern their needs and goals, and provide emotional and instrumental support to enable them to reach their goals. Sometimes advocates meet their partners at the partners’ homes, or at community settings such as courts or social service agencies where they can advocate together for needed systemic resources; and they often collaborate with other important stakeholders, such as their partners’ teachers and guidance counselors in the case of the high school or housing specialists, case managers, or shelter advocates in the case of the domestic violence program. An advocate may, for example, help her high school partner figure out that he is unable to complete his work not because he is “dumb” but because he is exhausted after a long school day and a second shift taking care of younger siblings. The advocate may accompany this partner to explain to a teacher why the student is not completing assignments and discuss how to help the student talk about these challenges more openly. An advocate working with a domestic violence survivor may help her partner think through what she wants to do next with her life, and then identify sources of scholarships if she decides she wants further education, apply for housing if that is her goal, or learn how trauma is affecting her children.

Advocates receive group supervision at the university, provided by a licensed clinical psychologist (not a faculty member) with extensive community organizing experience. Prior to beginning their work, the group supervisor orients advocates to the philosophy and practice of relationship-centered advocacy and its differences from formal counseling on the one hand, and case management on the other (see Goodman et al., 2009, for further details). Once advocates start working with their partners, usually after about a month, group supervision provides opportunities for feedback and reflection on advocates’ developing ideas, feelings, skills, and strategies for helping partners reach their goals. It is common in this supervision that peers support each other in reflecting on their reactions to the advocacy work and in finding creative ways
to support their partners. Periodically, the groups receive training on relevant subjects, such as navigating complex systems, establishing relationships, integrating instrumental and emotional support, and working across race and ethnicity, class, and gender boundaries. In addition, advocates receive periodic on-site supervision provided by school counselors at the school and by experienced advocates at the local domestic violence program that focuses mainly on identifying relevant resources for partners.

We attempted to contact and recruit all CAP participants who had graduated from the mental health counseling master’s program between 1.5 and 2.5 years after their CAP experience. We were able to contact 20 of 29 advocates, all but one of whom agreed to participate. At about the 15th interview, new codes were not being produced. Nevertheless, we continued to interview an additional four participants because we had already made contact with them. Thus, the final sample included a total of 19 participants (17 women and 2 men). Of these, two identified as Asian/Asian-American, two as African-American/Black, two as Hispanic/Latinx/multiracial, two based on their country of origin (not named here to protect anonymity), and 11 as White. Participants’ identified sexual orientations were heterosexual \((n = 15)\), gay \((n = 2)\), bisexual \((n = 1)\), and queer \((n = 1)\); advocates’ ages ranged from 22 to 33 years \((M_{\text{age}} = 26, SD = 2.75)\). Advocates had either partnered with high school students \((n = 8)\) or domestic violence survivors \((n = 11)\).

**Procedures**

First, we contacted all participants by email, explaining that we were interested in learning about their experience of the CAP program and asking them to contact us if they were interested in participating. When they responded, we asked them to send back a signed consent form and scheduled a time to talk, either in-person \((n = 5)\) if they were local, or by phone if they had moved away \((n = 14)\). Participants were then interviewed by either the second or the fourth author for approximately 60 to 90 minutes and received a $20 gift cards to a popular store for their participation. All interviews were tape-recorded with participants’ permission and transcribed verbatim.

The interview guide questions explored a range of areas relevant to the CAP model and its potential impact (both positive and negative), including to what extent and how CAP participation had (a) facilitated or failed to facilitate competency in advocacy and clinical work, (b) helped or failed to help them think about how systems of privilege and oppression shaped their own and others’ well-being, and (c) influenced or failed to influence them personally and professionally over time. In each area, we asked participants to tell us illustrative stories and to tie specific aspects of CAP to their described
perceptions and experiences. Participants were also asked about specific moments and experiences that they found unsatisfying, challenging, or difficult. These questions provided a framework for the conversation, but the guide was meant to be flexible, leaving room for new questions that would help participants describe their experiences with as much breadth and depth as possible (Milne & Oberle, 2005). (See Appendix for the full list of potential questions, but note that interviewers took a much more conversational approach to the interview than the questions would suggest). Immediately after each interview, the interviewers took notes on any salient details about how participants responded to the various questions, or on themes and ideas that emerged. Although these field notes were not formally coded, they were used throughout the data analysis process to clarify interview content.

**Data Analysis**

To analyze the data, we used qualitative content analysis with constant comparison (Kim, Sefcik, & Bradway, 2017). Although constant comparison, described next, is associated with grounded theory, qualitative descriptive research commonly adapts specific techniques from other qualitative traditions, referred to as “hues, tones, and textures” (Kahlke, 2014; Sandelowski, 2000, p. 337). The coding process involved three levels of analysis: (a) open coding, or chunking the text based on discrete perceptions, experiences, or “meaning units” within the interview transcripts; (b) organizing open codes into categories based on similar concepts; and (c) integrating categories into overarching themes that captured the relationships among categories (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Codes, categories, and themes evolved through constant comparison, a process in which we compared newly collected data with previous data to generate new codes, refine earlier ones, explore their relationships to one another, and integrate them into a coherent framework (Boeije, 2002). For example, during open coding, we developed the code “I could feel the frustration myself and I wasn’t even in the situation because I was working with her.” Then as we worked to combine early codes into categories, that code fell under the broader heading “Empathic involvement with partner’s experience of oppression.” Later in the process, this category was combined with others under a still broader umbrella: Building Empathy.

Each member of the research team served as the first coder for one set of interviews and a reviewer for another set. Disagreements between first coders and reviewers were resolved through discussion in weekly meetings. The analysis process was reflexive and interactive in that codes were grouped and regrouped to accommodate new data and researcher insights (Sandelowski,
Throughout the process, the first and last authors documented ideas, patterns, and general reflections about emergent themes, which then informed the coding process (Creswell, 2009). The third author reviewed the resulting coding scheme for clarity.

**Reflexivity and Rigor**

We took several precautions to ensure the credibility of our findings. Most importantly, given that we bring our own experiences to any exploration of the interpersonal world, we tried to bracket our hopes, beliefs, and biases to approach the interviews and data analysis as openly as possible (Gearing, 2004). We represent a diverse group of authors in terms of race, gender identity, ethnicity, class, and educational background. Further, all but one of us has been involved with the CAP at some point. The first author (L. A. G.), a White woman from an upper-middle class background, and the third author (J. E. H.), a Black woman from a lower-middle class background, founded the program, developed its community partnerships, and created the relationship-centered advocacy model upon which it is based. The second author (J. M. W.), a Filipino man of a low-income background, and the last author (J. M.), a middle-class White woman who immigrated to the United States from Uzbekistan, participated in the CAP as master’s students. Only the fourth author (N. G.), a White upper-middle class woman, did not have any direct links to the CAP.

Throughout the coding process, we paid careful attention to how these social locations and biases influenced the way we approached the process of analyzing the data. For example, we each shared some dimensions of our participants’ identities and not others. As we considered the interview data and developed codes, we reflected together on how those convergent and divergent identities shaped our perceptions. Through this process, several White members of the team were challenged to consider their unacknowledged but evident assumption that students of color would change less as a result of the CAP because they had already experienced race-based oppression firsthand. Further, the second author, a man of color, recognized his tendency to view many of the middle-class White advocates who worked in the domestic violence shelter solely in terms of their privileged racial and class identities, which he saw as potential barriers to empathy, disregarding the potential of their shared gender as a source of mutual understanding. In both cases, these biases were challenged in the context of group discussion involving ongoing inquiry into how our backgrounds shaped our thinking.

As for our close connections to CAP, on the one hand our familiarity with the model was helpful in that we had a deep understanding of the experiences participants described. On the other hand, these very connections caused us
to hold a priori beliefs about the value of the model for teaching students about advocacy and social justice. We worked hard throughout the process to bracket these beliefs by constantly challenging ourselves to explore what did not feel good to participants, did not work, or did not promote growth along with what did.

The last author, a faculty member in our program who had not been involved with CAP, was helpful throughout the process of self-examination. She participated in all meetings, serving to ask questions, challenge coding decisions, and generally ensure to the extent possible that our presuppositions and wishes did not influence our data coding as we proceeded. Although it is impossible to be totally free of bias, we tried to stay as close as possible to participants’ meanings.

Another strategy for ensuring rigor was source triangulation; at the end of the coding process we met with a group of nine current CAP students to discuss their impressions of our findings from their vantage point as current students. These conversations led us to sharpen the language of several codes and categories that students found confusing. Finally, the authors engaged in memo-writing throughout the interview and data analysis process, tracking their ideas and thoughts about what stood out while conducting interviews, how interviews were similar or different across participants, and how codes evolved.

Results

Participants described a dynamic and iterative set of processes and outcomes at play in Becoming an Advocate, depicted in Figure 1. Data were distilled into three broad themes: Internal Grappling, Building the Advocacy Relationship, and Integrating the Advocate Identity. This section describes each theme and the categories and codes they included (see Table 1). Consistent with traditions of some qualitative research, we used the following terms to denote the numeric range of participants who described any given experience: “some” represented two to six participants, “many” represented seven to 12, and “most” represented 13 or more participants (Chang, Voils, Sandelowski, Hasselblad, & Crandell, 2009).

Internal Grappling

All participants described a process of intertwined intellectual and emotional struggle, called Internal Grappling, which emerged sharply at the beginning and evolved as their work progressed. The process included three categories: (a) growing awareness, (b) strong feelings, and (c) dialogue with peers and supervisors.
Growing awareness. Participants’ internal grappling led to an increasingly salient and sophisticated awareness of self, other, and context that developed throughout the year through two interacting processes, (a) waking up and (b) reflecting on identity and privilege. As advocates listened to their partners’ stories and visited their homes or accompanied them to the agencies that could provide or withhold benefits, they increasingly awakened to their partners’ everyday life experiences and the ways that systemic oppression shaped those experiences. Bearing witness in this way challenged advocates’ expectations and previously held beliefs, as the following quotation illustrates: “It was really eye opening, I think, to be in someone else’s home and see how other people live and see what they are really going through. It brought the awareness to a different level.”

As they “woke up” and increasingly reflected on the disparity between their own privilege and its absence in their partners’ lives, advocates grew to understand that privilege and oppression are more shifting and complex than they had previously understood.
Although most described this process as strenuous, many also found it essential:

I didn’t really think going into it that I was gonna have to look at myself at all. That was a big part of it that was exhausting and challenging and draining and ultimately extremely beneficial to who I am as a person.

**Strong feelings.** As their relationships with their partners deepened, so did advocates’ emotional responses. Within the category strong feelings, three broad emotions emerged: (a) frustrated and overwhelmed, (b) angry, and (c) moved and inspired. From the start and often continuing all the way through,
all advocates identified feeling both frustrated and overwhelmed as their developing relationship brought them into more direct and immediate contact with the realities of their partners’ lives, the enormity of their partners’ needs, the limited resources available, and the ways that larger systems thwarted them at every turn. At times, this left them feeling helpless and ineffective:

I know she needed to take English classes. In order to take English classes, she needed to get childcare. In order to get childcare, she needed vouchers. In order to get vouchers, she needed to be a U.S. citizen. I was honestly so overwhelmed. Where do I start with this?

For many advocates, witnessing systemic oppression firsthand led to new feelings of anger about injustice. This advocate describes the way her partner was treated by the school system: “They never gave her the time of day. Then I called on her behalf, and all of a sudden wheels started turning, and it made me so angry. . . .”

As their relationships with their partners deepened over the year, most advocates also described feeling tremendously moved and inspired. These experiences countered feelings of helplessness and illuminated the value of their work, ultimately contributing to their social justice commitment and confidence as advocates:

I liked who she was a lot, and I liked the ways in which she pushed against the leaders there. . . . I admired a lot of her tenacity in the ways that she did things. Yeah, that’s what will stick with me, I think.

**Dialogue with peers and supervisors.** Throughout this process—as advocates woke up, reflected, and dealt with strong feelings—a majority identified the critical importance of challenging and supportive conversations with other advocates and supervisors. For example, most reported that difficult dialogues and direct confrontation were both uncomfortable and critical to the learning process, as the following quotation illustrates:

Maybe if an African American partner was having particular struggles getting a job or getting employment, and then also having one of my African American peers say, “I’ve experienced that same thing,” then this is me thinking to myself, even though this person is sitting next to me in a master’s program at a well-known college, they still have very similar experiences . . . I think that was really what opened up my eyes a little bit more.

Challenges such as these from peers illuminated the systemic underbelly of problems that at first could be seen only as individual issues. At the same time, most also found enormous comfort in sharing their emotional
responses with peers. Finding commonalities across experiences was a process that helped them feel less alone and better able to cope with such intense feelings.

**Building the Advocacy Relationship**

The second theme, Building the Advocacy Relationship, encompassed the relational processes between advocates and their partners that participants highlighted as most salient. The three categories comprising this theme (building empathy, learning to respect partners’ goals, and integrating instrumental and relational support) each contributed to and was informed by Internal Grappling.

**Building empathy.** As advocates settled into their role, they described a deepening empathic connection with their partners which emerged specifically through (a) working in context, (b) encountering barriers, and (c) sharing experiences with peers and supervisors. Many advocates described ways in which being present with their partners in their everyday contexts (e.g., homes, schools, and neighborhoods) led directly to heightened feelings of empathy.

To really immerse into the client’s worldview and experiences . . . that’s really, I guess, true empathy, really taking the perspective of the client. . . . You’re not just vicariously listening to the client, but really stepping outside and being with the client and being immersed in the system.

Partnerships brought advocates into direct contact with the systemic barriers facing their partners not only as witnesses but also as active participants. For most advocates, physically experiencing these harsh realities further expanded their empathic connection.

I felt like when I observed how certain teachers would talk at a student, I felt very talked at at times when I didn’t really feel like it was warranted . . . In that moment, I was piecing together like, I feel ashamed for asking you something, and it’s possible that my student might feel the same way.

Finally, many advocates also found that sharing stories of frustrating systems with each other in supervision helped them see more clearly how oppression functions across situations, again enhancing their empathy for their partners.

**Learning to respect partners’ goals.** Learning to respect their partners’ goals was a challenging developmental process, which advocates described as
having three interrelated aspects: (a) initial high expectations, (b) awareness of privilege in goal identification, and (c) setting aside agendas. Most advocates identified initially high expectations for their partners and for what they hoped to accomplish. However, as their self-awareness and empathy grew, they recognized that these expectations arose from their position of privilege. I went in with the expectation of “You’re going in to advocate for people who are voiceless within the system. You’re going in to change the way that the system operates.” Although advocates occupied a variety of social locations, not all of which were privileged, certain differences seemed to drive these early perspectives. One participant explained: “It’s such a privileged thought of ‘Oh, I’m here and I have power, so I’m gonna change the system.’”

The more advocates recognized the source of their own goals and expectations, the more they sought to focus on understanding their partners’ perspectives. This awareness enabled them to set aside their own agenda to focus on partner-identified goals:

I remember… [my client] was talking about maybe going to act in a porn film. I remember my initial reaction was like, “Don’t do that!” But maybe. . . this would be something that could powerfully change her family’s circumstances. Who am I to say that’s not the correct next step for her? Would she have other opportunities if there weren’t circumstances road blocking her? . . . I, most likely, will never have to make that choice, but it’s because of privilege.

**Integrating instrumental and relational support.** Most of the advocates grew to recognize the ways that both instrumental and relational support benefited their partners and enhanced each other—a strong relationship was a necessary foundation for collaboration, and that relationship, in turn, was strengthened by pragmatic efforts to address tangible goals. Moreover, both instrumental and relational support became more effective and better integrated as advocates developed greater empathy and alignment with partners’ goals.

Specifically, this theme comprised three categories: (a) valuing relationship over action alone, (b) recognizing the importance of accessibility, and (c) mobilizing systems. Most advocates talked about coming to recognize the value of relationship over action alone as a central part of this process, as the following quotation illustrates:

I felt like really, really getting to know that person and then moving on to really what you need to be advocating for on their behalf is what is so important. . . . Like if I had just come in and been like, “Look, here’s my role. This is it, and I’m gonna help you do this with school, and we’re gonna talk about home and whatever,” without getting to know them and their interests and what’s really going on for them.
Some also discussed how these relationships depended upon being available and accessible to their partners. Advocates would meet with their partners wherever in the community was most convenient. There were no office visits, nor 50-minute hr frameworks. Many noted how this flexibility heightened the sense of trust and mutuality that partners needed: “She invited me to her court case hearing ‘cause she had a custody case that she was doing with her husband and she invited me to come, taking her, seeing what was going on and some of the challenges.”

In addition to physical presence in the very domains in which partners were struggling, most advocates recalled mobilizing systems and resources on behalf of their partners as a crucial part of their work. Mobilization accomplished goals and enhanced relationships by helping partners to identify resources and negotiate with providers (e.g., teachers, parents, or school administrators in the high school or shelter staff; housing advocates or legal advocates for domestic violence survivors) and access systems (e.g., build resumes, find employment, access free or low-cost programs). One advocate described the way that identifying resources and relational trust worked hand in hand:

We had been meeting every week and most of our work focused on [accessing resources], a little bit on legal stuff. I put together this binder for her. I remember her being really grateful for it. I had called, I think, every [relevant organization] on earth. . . . I remember her saying that she was completely shocked that I had done it. She was like, “I haven’t had anybody do something like this for me. I haven’t had anybody try this hard to help me figure this out.

Thus, relational and instrumental aspects of the work deepened in tandem, which in turn provided opportunities for building deeper empathy and awareness.

**Integrating Advocate Identity**

Advocates described a process of integrating their experience and learning into an advocate identity. For most, this new identity began to coalesce towards the end of the year and continues to influence their personal and professional lives. Specifically, advocates identified a shift in perspective across three categories: (a) insight into oppression, (b) social justice commitment, and (c) advocacy competence.

*Insight into oppression.* Advocates reported emerging from their training with a deeper and more complex understanding of how systems and structures
operate to oppress specific marginalized communities (understanding systemic oppression), and how that oppression trickles down to shape individual experience (understanding oppression’s effects). Armed with these insights, they reported a greater ability to conceptualize their partners’ and their current and future clients’ difficulties from a systemic perspective (learning to make systemic conceptualizations).

With regard to understanding systemic oppression, most advocates commented that their experience with their partners and stories from their peers combined to help them step back and see the general ways that systems (e.g., schools, social services, and justice, medical, and mental health systems) caused tremendous harm to marginalized communities. Although many of these systems were filled with well-meaning individuals, participants came away from CAP understanding how systems punish, obstruct, limit, or otherwise harm those with little power. This is well illustrated in an advocates’ description of her partner’s school: “The philosophy around the discipline with the children I thought was very oppressive in terms of being very quick to suspend, or kick them out of school, or expel them.” Another participant working at a domestic violence agency described: “I think [this organization] did good work, but . . . seeing preferential treatment and discrimination and all of that firsthand in a system that is designed to help . . . it was good to see that firsthand.”

Most advocates also described coming to understand how oppression trickles down to shape individual experiences such as mental health problems, disempowerment, and disconnection, as illustrated by the following two quotations:

I guess that connection with mental health is that constant feeling of being defeated . . . like you keep bumping up against these systems. They’re much bigger than you and much more powerful and well-connected. I think it’s really easy to feel defeated, depressed and anxious. . . . I think it’s hard to feel healthy and good about yourself if you’re constantly being overlooked or put down or not allowed to really speak for yourself.

I know my [Black] male students struggled with some of those stereotypes, being up to no good, being thug . . . I think it impacted his self-esteem . . . He was feeling a lot of pressure to not live up to those negative expectations, like the negative media stereotypes, but also feeling like that may be the only way he can go.

Thus, most advocates reported that insights into the systemic sources and individual effects of oppression dramatically enhanced their ability to see mental health challenges from a systemic perspective.
Social justice commitment. Most advocates highlighted the ways in which their current commitment to social justice had roots in their CAP training. Every advocate expressed a professional commitment, and most of them also expressed a more personal engagement with social justice. Many attributed these qualities to CAP current behaviors, such as sharing their insights about systemic oppression with others,

I can say now I’m so motivated by social justice . . . I think I am more angry towards the [U.S.] American political system, less complacent. I like to challenge people in my life more on their beliefs than I did before, especially my family.

Many also saw themselves becoming more “politically engaged”:

I feel like I am more aware on an interpersonal level of how I’m interacting with anyone—with the person on the street or people at my workplace, that kind of thing . . . . Even just asking a question here or there to increase other people’s awareness as much as I can.

Regarding their commitment to social justice in their professional lives, most advocates described the centrality of systemic interventions and advocacy in their career goals and professional identity:

I think being exposed to systemic work and advocacy . . . gave me more awareness and understanding of how individual work alone is not going to create change. You gotta go beyond that. I think that’s very much directing where I go with my career today . . . . To create change and effect change, you gotta go beyond the individual.

Advocacy competence. The final piece of integrating an advocate identity was developing a sense of competence in their role. Specifically, advocates discussed (a) gaining knowledge about the nature of advocacy, (b) acquiring specific advocacy skills, and (c) feeling confidence in the advocacy role. Regarding knowledge gained, most advocates noted that the CAP provided unique insights into how advocacy differed from counseling. Participants noted a number of distinctive features of relationship-centered advocacy in particular, including facilitating choice and control, “doing with” as opposed to “doing for,” emphasizing the relationship, and developing a systemic analysis of partners’ difficulties.

Regarding advocacy skills, participants noted a range of new competencies, including how to find resources and information to support people in crisis, how to consult with professionals from other disciplines, how to build
on partners’ or (later) clients’ strengths in specific and concrete ways, and how to listen for partners/clients’ needs that extend beyond the emotional or mental health domains. Some participants described the ways they were now bringing these competencies into their current positions as counselors:

I do a lot of advocacy within my program currently. My primary role is a clinician providing individual, group, family, milieu therapy and case management for my clients. Every single thing that I just said requires advocacy skills. . . . Not only am I advocating to their families [but also] within the school system, within the broader Department of Children and Families system . . . to the community.

With enhanced knowledge and skills, most advocates emerged from the CAP with a sense of confidence in their future as advocates, as the following quotation illustrates:

I think [CAP] prepared me in making me feel more comfortable speaking up for my clients and less intimidated by the systems. Even when I’m interviewing for jobs, if they say, “This work is very frustrating. How do you manage it?” . . . I say, “There’s always gonna be flaws in the system. There’s always gonna be injustices. That’s inevitable, unfortunately, but it’s learning how to fight for what we can fight for and change what we can change, and not just assume that the answer is going to be ‘no’ all of the time.” It’s the mindset I take with all of my kids and my families that I work with now. I think that’s definitely due in part to [CAP].

Discussion

As our field has grown increasingly concerned about the role of systemic oppression on mental health, scholars and practitioners have called on graduate programs to provide training in social justice advocacy (Ali & Sichel, 2014; Mallinckrodt, Miles, & Levy, 2014). In response, counseling and applied psychology programs across the country have built into their curricula training on micro- and macrolevel advocacy competencies, most of which build on multicultural and feminist values (e.g., Burnes & Singh, 2010; Goodman et al., 2014; Mallinckrodt et al.; Midgett & Doumas, 2016; Motulsky, Gere, Saleem, & Trantham, 2014). Although a few studies have attempted to capture students’ experiences of these training efforts, we have much to learn about the developmental process by which trainees become advocates and the longer-term outcomes of this process (Koch & Juntunen, 2014c). This qualitative descriptive study aimed to fill this gap. We investigated the experiences of 19 former advocates from the CAP, a yearlong advocacy training based on a relationship-centered advocacy model.
Our initial goal was to develop a rich and comprehensive picture of the processes students went through and the outcomes they reported 2 years later. Over time, this goal evolved into the following central question: “What are the processes and outcomes of becoming an advocate?” Answers reflected three dynamic and interlocking themes, depicted in Figure 1 and listed (along with categories and codes) in Table 1. The first two, Internal Grappling and Building the Advocacy Relationship, represent a braided process and the third, Integrating the Advocate Identity, describes the outcome of that process.

**Integration With Existing Scholarship**

Overall, graduates, now between 1.5 and 2.5 years beyond their CAP experience, described a powerful and transformative experience that helped them move fully into the role of social justice advocate. Although the themes that emerged from the study are overlapping and inseparable for heuristic purposes, we describe them here as distinct aspects of a larger whole.

**Internal Grappling.** Although they came to CAP with widely varying social locations and experiences, all “woke up” to aspects of systemic oppression they had not before considered. Waking up to what had been obscured about their own and others’ lives triggered powerful feelings, challenging self-reflection, and painful discussion. Ultimately, it opened the door to greater empathy, stronger relationships, and more sophisticated intellectually and emotionally tinged awareness of self, other, and context.

This theme of Internal Grappling is consistent with prior research showing that graduate students engaged in advocacy training often report an “eye-opening” confrontation with privilege and oppression (Caldwell & Vera, 2010, p. 169), coupled with a range of powerful emotions (e.g., Goodman et al., 2014; Koch et al., 2014; Nilsson et al., 2011; Stewart-Sicking et al., 2013; Toporek & Worthington, 2014). Notably, these eye-opening experiences and subsequent internal struggles are starting points in many identity development theories (Erchull et al., 2009; Helms, 1995) as well as the theory of transformative learning. Yet the present study is unique in its articulation of how this struggle continues to drive learning about the self as an agent of social justice, fueling an advocate identity that persists beyond the training experience. In other words, it is not only a common feature of advocacy training (e.g., Koch et al., 2014), but is in fact a necessary driver of a developmental process.

**Building the Advocacy Relationship.** The fodder for internal grappling was advocates’ relationships with their partners. As advocates developed close bonds with their partners and bore witness to the small and large ways that systemic
obstacles limited options and triggered distress, they came to understand why their partners made the choices they did. But deep empathy and understanding grew less from witnessing than from actually experiencing a facsimile of their partners’ oppression as they tried to help partners reach their goals only to be thwarted themselves by a person, an agency, or a diffuse set of systems. Advocates also learned very directly the inseparability of practical and relational support—providing practical support strengthened the relationship just as a strengthened relationship enabled collaboration on shared goals.

The theme of building the advocacy relationship is new to the literature on advocacy training, in part because few existing advocacy models focus as heavily on the relationship between the advocate and partner, developed over the course of an academic year, and built through time spent together in the partners’ world working on the partners’ goals. Stewart-Sicking et al. (2013) position connections between students and finding a personal connection to the work as a whole as the first stage of their model, but there is relatively less attention paid to connections with community members. In fact, 47% of the students in their sample did not work in the community. Even the identity development models that inform the present study describe the building and transformation of relationships in very broad strokes. For example, feminist identity development theory notes that women’s relationship with men and other women tend to vary depending on their stage of feminist identity development, but without dedicated attention paid to the individual relationships that shape this process (Erchull et al., 2009). Our findings indicate that the relationship was the lynchpin of the entire CAP experience. It was, in some sense, the motor that propelled the internal grappling, fueled commitment to the work, and facilitated integration of the advocate identity.

**Integrating the Advocate Identity.** Like letting the genie out of the bottle, participants’ direct experiences with systemic oppression and the self-reflection it triggered led to a permanent and enduring shift. In response, participants became more actively engaged in social justice work through interpersonal interactions, social activism, and professional direction. They also described new advocacy-related competencies and the confidence to use these skills in their work with clients.

This theme is consistent with prior research showing that social justice advocacy training often results in a spirited commitment to fighting social injustice in personal and professional contexts (e.g., Beer, Spanierman, Greene, & Todd, 2012; Koch et al., 2014; Stewart-Sicking, 2013; Toporek & Worthington, 2014) and the skills to do so (e.g., Goodman et al., 2014; Midgett & Doumas, 2016; Nilsson et al., 2011; Weintraub & Goodman, 2010). Because this study explored the experience of alumni, however, it is the first to show
that far from diminishing over time, advocates’ competence in and commitment to the work continued to build as they moved into new roles, often helping them sustain a sense of hope and direction. Indeed, it is striking that every single interviewee articulated how the transformation that began with CAP grew stronger rather than weaker over time. The stability and depth of the advocate identity are parallel to the final stages of feminist and racial identity development models, characterized by lasting commitment to social change (Erchull et al., 2009; Helms, 1995). Indeed, the similarities of the process this study revealed and those described by feminist and racial identity scholars offers hope that the advocate identity will remain enduring dimensions of CAP participants’ professional identities going forward.

Taken as a whole, these themes suggest that microlevel advocacy training that highlights the advocacy relationship, promotes direct collaboration using instrumental and emotional support, and provides opportunities for ongoing critical reflection, is a highly effective mechanism for training students to become advocates. Calls for social justice training have foregrounded two teaching goals (Buckley, 1998; Vera & Speight, 2003): to help students develop heightened sensitivity to injustice, and to learn the skills needed to fight it. Results of this study indicate that the CAP meets these goals in deep and enduring ways, in part because the CAP model appears to operate not just to develop a new professional competency but also facilitates a transformative experience that initiates lasting identity development.

Limitations

Findings from the present study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. Regarding methods, although we chose to use a qualitative methodology in order to develop a rich, nuanced picture of CAP processes and outcomes, this method does not allow for generalizability. Although the CAP alumni were able to give insight into the long-term impact of the program, the retrospective nature of their interviews may also have altered or limited the depth of their responses. Further, all but the fourth author were involved with the CAP prior to the start of the study and perhaps introduced unintended bias into the analyses. We took steps to mitigate this through our process of ongoing self-reflection and discussion, member checking, and including an auditor on our team whose purpose was to check our assumptions, biases, and presuppositions.

In terms of scope, it is important to note that the CAP focused exclusively on microlevel advocacy. Although advocates had some opportunity to engage in systems change work and emerged from the experience with a heightened interest in activism, policy work, and other forms of macrolevel advocacy,
this was not a central focus of the training. Regarding the sample itself, although our sample comprised participants of varying backgrounds, over half were White and most held a certain level of class privilege by virtue of their presence in a private university. It is not clear how a more diverse group of advocates would respond to the CAP model. Further, the CAP itself was embedded within a master’s program with a clear social justice mission. Although our sample responded to questions about the CAP specifically, it is ultimately impossible to separate that experience from its larger context. Despite these limitations, this study has a number of significant implications for research and training.

**Implications for Training**

The results indicate that the CAP offers a promising approach to advocacy training that builds on existing models. Current models have noted many of the same outcomes as the CAP in terms of cognitive shifts and increased social justice commitment (Koch & Juntunen, 2014c; Nilsson et al., 2011) and have pointed to the importance of critical reflection on dissonant reactions as drivers of the process (Goodman et al., 2014; Stewart-Sicking et al., 2013). The unique focus of the CAP on a yearlong individual advocacy relationship has helped to further illuminate the twin processes of Internal Grappling and Building an Advocacy Relationship with the goal of developing an identity as an advocate. Based on these findings, we offer several recommendations for other programs interested in microlevel advocacy training. First, we recommend that a one-on-one advocacy relationship be the core experience around which other training components revolve. An empathic connection to another person appears to enhance the ability to understand the extent and nature of systemic oppression and its damaging effects. In particular, such a relationship may serve to set off some of the early dissonant reactions, which are necessary for driving identity development.

Second, we recommend that whenever possible, social justice advocacy training should extend over an entire academic year. Participants noted that building relationships and forming an understanding of their partners in context was a process that unfolded slowly and gradually. One semester would not be sufficient for trainees to build the relationships necessary to work effectively with partners, accomplish shared goals, or transmute challenging experiences into useful insights. Nor would a semester be sufficient time for students to learn advocacy skills. One would not expect advocacy training, with its attendant ethical, instrumental, strategic, and relational elements, to be simpler or quicker than psychotherapy training. Nor should one expect the process of identity development that advocacy training so closely resembles to be a process that unfolds quickly.
Third, programs need to take the time to build collaborations with community organizations that can identify interested advocacy partners. This is a time consuming process that itself involves mutual trust, transparency, and clear articulation of goals, responsibilities, and potential risks. Not only do these collaborations need to be established initially, but they need to be monitored, nurtured, and renegotiated throughout the year. Terms of the contract must ensure that all the players—the university, the partnering organization, and the advocates and their partners—will benefit. Although this takes time and commitment, such collaborations are critical to the process of social justice advocacy training, and are themselves enactments of social justice advocacy on a community level.

Finally, we recommend that trainees doing advocacy receive group supervision from someone with experience in community work as well as counseling. Supervision should include opportunities for difficult dialogues that challenge students’ assumptions, beliefs, and judgments. The supervision should also prepare advocates for feeling frustrated and overwhelmed, help normalize negative feelings when they arise, and facilitate knowledge and skill development. Creating this kind of structure also takes time and commitment, especially if the program is not part and parcel of a course for which an instructor and her or his students get credit.

Implications for Research

Perhaps the chief utility of this study is that it provides a foundation for continuing exploration of the impact of CAP and other advocacy training projects. For example, we are now engaged in a quasi-experimental study comparing CAP’s effects on helping skills with those obtained in a lab without an advocacy-training component. These results will enable us to address the limitation of the current study that the CAP is embedded within a social justice oriented program that may have contributed to participants’ sense of its impact. Ultimately, our field would benefit from comparisons of this and other models of social justice advocacy training. As noted earlier, innovative training models are springing up in programs across the country. We need to understand more about how participants develop within models, and to identify the most potent contributors to their growth. Perhaps in this way we will be able to harness the power of these models to ensure that our graduate students become the social justice advocates that our field has determined they should be.

Conclusion

This study’s findings show the power of a yearlong social justice advocacy training model to create lasting personal and professional change by helping...
advocates gain the skills, confidence, and commitment to address oppression in their partners’ and clients’ lives. Indeed, such training seems vital not only for graduate students overtly interested in advocacy, but for all graduate students in counseling and applied psychology. It offers a unique opportunity to fight social inequality through deep involvement in the lives of marginalized community members, meaningful self-reflection on privilege and oppression, and expanded capacity to understand and address the contribution of context to well-being. We hope that this study and the model on which it is based will inspire further efforts to bring social justice advocacy training to the field.

Appendix

Interview Questions

General

1. Can you tell me why you got involved in the CAP?
2. Looking back, what stands out the most about your CAP experience?
3. What aspects of being an advocate, if any, were particularly rewarding?
   a. (Probe) Can you tell me about a specific time that was rewarding in that way?
4. What aspects of the experience were particularly challenging or difficult or even harmful?
   a. (Probe) What was a particularly challenging moment in the supervision?
   b. (Probe) What was a particularly challenging moment in your work with your student/partner?
   c. (Probe) How did you address these challenges?

Clinical and Advocacy Skills

1. What is/how do you define advocacy?
2. Can you think of a specific time where you felt successful as an advocate for your partner? If yes, what skills do you think were helpful in that work?
3. Can you think of a specific time when you felt unsuccessful in your work as an advocate? If yes, how did you address that feeling?
4. Tell me about a time that really sticks out when you interacted with a system on behalf of your partner. What else do you imagine could have been helpful? What do you wish could have been done?
5. To what extent did the CAP help or fail to help you develop advocacy skills?
6. Can you think of a specific time during the work when you used clinical skills?
7. To what extent did the CAP help or fail to help you develop your clinical skills?

**Critical Self-Awareness, Social Justice Orientation, Understanding of Systems**

1. What is it/how do you define oppression?
2. How did you understand social oppression in your partner’s life? To what extent did it impact your partner’s mental health?
3. Tell me about a time when you encountered systemic barriers in your work with your partner?
4. To what extent did the CAP teach you or fail to teach you about social oppression?
5. To what extent do you think being an advocate contributed or failed to contribute to the way you understand yourself?
   a. (If it did contribute): Can you tell us about a particular moment that challenged you to think about your identity differently?
6. To what extent do you think being an advocate contributed or failed to contribute to your thinking about privilege and oppression in your own life? In your work?
   a. (If it did contribute): Can you tell me about a particular moment that challenged you to think about privilege and oppression in a new way?
7. To what extent (and how) did the CAP experience inform your values and worldview?
8. To what extent (and how) have you applied what you learned in the CAP to your ongoing professional work and sense of professional identity?
9. To what extent (and how) did the CAP shape or change the way you think of the helping role?
   a. (Probe) To what extent did it inform your understanding of what the work of mental health counseling could or should entail?
   b. (Probe) To what extent did it shape your personal approach to your work?

**Professional Identity**

1. Let’s shift gears to talking about your current work. Can you tell me a little about what you do now?
2. To what extent did participating in the CAP affect or fail to affect your career goals at the time and since then?
3. To what extent have you applied what you learned in the CAP to your ongoing work and sense of professional identity?
4. *Probe for all clinical and advocacy skills mentioned above:* You mentioned that you developed _____ skill in the CAP. To what extent, if at all, have you translated that skill to your current work?
5. Do you ever think back to your experience in the CAP during your current work? What kinds of scenarios bring that to light?
6. Are there any aspects of the CAP that you think were especially helpful in preparing you for this work?
7. Are there aspects of CAP that were harmful to your future work?
8. To what extent has the CAP influenced, or failed to influence, how you understand or conceptualize the people you work with?
9. Is there anything you wish you could change about your current work?

*Summing up.* Thanks so much for sharing all that with me. We’re near the end of the interview. I have just a few more questions.

1. Keeping what we’ve discussed in mind, if you could give any advice to students currently in the CAP, what would it be?
2. What would you say was the take-away message from your experience in the CAP?
3. If you could change anything about the CAP experience, what would it be?
4. How do you see your career progressing from here?
5. What are the areas in which you would like to continue developing?

That’s all the questions I have for you. Do you have anything else you’d like to add or ask?

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