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**Career Barriers and Coping Efficacy with International Students in Counseling
Psychology Programs**

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Abstract

This study uses Lent, Brown, and Hackett's (1994) Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) as a framework for understanding the career barriers and coping efficacy experienced by master's counseling psychology international students. Grounded in SCCT, we described coping efficacy as international students' perceived capability to navigate career barriers. Using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006), we explored the career barriers and coping efficacy of 12 master's counseling psychology international students. The first focus area, "international journey with multiple barriers," includes five themes: interpersonal stress; language barriers; financial pressures; advising concerns; and visa and immigration-related stress. The second focus area, "agents of change in the midst of barriers," includes five themes: self-regulating; stepping into discomfort; cognitive reappraising; becoming a change agent; and social support seeking. Findings demonstrate participants' coping efficacy and perceptions of themselves as agents of change. This study deepens our understanding of career development among master's counseling psychology international students.

Keywords: international students; social cognitive career theory; career barriers; coping efficacy; counseling psychology

Career Barriers and Coping Efficacy with International Students in Counseling Psychology Programs

In the 2018-2019 academic year, about one million international students were enrolled in higher education programs in the United States (U.S.), representing about 5.5% of the total U.S. higher education population (Institute of International Education, 2019). The U.S. has seen a slight decline in graduate student enrollment numbers since 2016 (Institute of International Education, 2019). The decline may be explained by contextual barriers that emerged since 2016 (e.g., “America First” policies, changing immigration laws), which impacted the perceptions of career opportunities among those who intended to study in the U.S. (Fischer, 2017). These contextual barriers may leave prospective students feeling as though educational investment in the U.S. is linked to new challenges or higher risks.

Earlier research provides a glimpse into the challenges and barriers encountered by international students (e.g., language, acculturation, social, financial, employment and educational barriers) but much of this work has focused on doctoral level training (Knox et al., 2013). The dearth of research on master’s students is surprising given that the number of master’s students in psychology programs is higher than the number of doctoral psychology students. One reason for the higher number of master’s students is the higher acceptance rate for master’s programs compared to doctoral programs. While acceptance rates for doctoral psychology programs range between 7% (i.e., social psychology) and 14% (i.e., developmental psychology), acceptance rates for master’s students range between 38% (i.e., social psychology) and 57% (i.e., counseling psychology; Michalski et al., 2019).

Research on international students in master’s mental health programs is critical because their career goals, the scope of their professional practice, their academic and career challenges, and coping efficacy can be different from those of doctoral students. While the career goals

associated with doctoral study often include an interest in clinical practice, teaching, and research (Guerin et al., 2015), master's students often pursue their degree to obtain certification, licensure, or employment after graduation (Briehl & Wasieleski, 2004). In fact, master's programs in mental health are often designed to train graduates for careers as counselors and therapists rather than for careers in academia and research settings (Michalski et al., 2019).

Master's and doctoral students in mental health programs share a common theory base, receive extensive supervision, and learn similar clinical interventions and ethical standards (Buckman et al., 2018). However, the breadth and depth of the scope of doctoral training (e.g., testing and assessment, program evaluation, consultation) may facilitate additional career opportunities and practices for doctoral students compared to their master's counterparts (Buckman et al., 2018). Thus, compared to professionals with a doctorate in psychology, professionals with a master's degree in mental health are limited in the services they can provide and the settings where they can practice. This is because in the U.S., the doctoral degree in psychology is necessary to adopt the title "psychologist." Therefore, international students who are interested in independent clinical practice at the master's level, have to pursue mental health licenses outside of psychology (e.g., become a licensed professional counselor). This may come as a surprise for students from countries where professionals can earn the title psychologist soon after the completion of a bachelor's or master's degree (e.g., Mexico).

The academic and clinical training of master's students also differs from those of doctoral students because of the shorter duration of their program (i.e., approximately 3 years for master's and 5 years for doctoral students). International students in master's programs may feel that they have insufficient time to adjust to sociocultural differences, acquire adequate language proficiency, and adopt to the norms of U.S. academic and occupational programs [see Table 1].

Given the unique contextual barriers of master's international students in mental health programs, the present study examined perceived career barriers and coping efficacy among international students in master's level counseling psychology programs. Specifically, the authors focused on two constructs of Lent et al.'s (1994) Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)—namely, *career barriers* and *coping efficacy*. This was done to explore the barriers that master's counseling psychology international students may experience on their career path, and their beliefs about their capacity to manage and cope with these barriers. In line with SCCT, this manuscript defines *career barriers* as contextual influences that negatively impact international students' academic, clinical, and professional experiences in counseling psychology. *Coping efficacy* is defined as international students' perceived capability to navigate career barriers. The authors focused on these two specific constructs because although empirical research using the SCCT framework has proliferated during the past decades, including meta-analytic works (e.g., Lent et al., 2018; Sheu et al., 2010), relatively less has focused on contextual factors (e.g., career barriers) faced by understudied groups (Lent et al., 2018), such as international students.

Theoretical Framework

Grounded in the general social cognitive theory proposed by Bandura (1986), SCCT centers on how cognitive-person variables (i.e., outcome expectations, interest and goals, and self-efficacy) interact with other person (e.g., gender, nationality, age) and environmental variables (i.e., barriers and support) to inform academic and vocational interest, goal setting, and actions (Lent et al., 1994, 2000). Outcome expectations refer to perceived consequences if one were to choose a particular career and whether selecting that career would lead to preferred outcomes. Outcome expectations are often a reflection of a combination of past experiences and interactions with the immediate environment; an environment that is shaped by social and political influences (Lent et al., 2000). SCCT proposes that environmental barriers can “hinder

efforts to implement a particular educational or occupational goal” (Lent et al., 2001, p. 475). If students perceive negative consequences or significant difficulties in overcoming career barriers, they may experience challenges translating their occupational interests into goals, and their goals into actions. These perceptions of negative consequences can negatively impact coping efficacy, the internal representation of an individual’s belief in their ability to overcome the contextual barriers that impede educational or career goals (Lent et al., 1994, 2001). On the other hand, social support can assist individuals in executing coping strategies, and in turn, could support individuals’ beliefs in their ability to overcome these contextual barriers.

Barriers Experienced by International Students

Empirical literature has documented a range of barriers related to the career development of the general international student population. These include language, acculturation (e.g., microaggressions), educational, employment (e.g., visa related restrictions), financial (e.g., higher tuition fees than domestic students), and social (e.g., loneliness) barriers (Houshmand et al., 2014; Knox et al., 2013; McKinley, 2019). Due to language and sociocultural barriers, non-native speakers may be perceived less favorably (Gill, 1994; Stewart et al., 1985), which could lead to increased anxiety (Brown, 2008) and reduced confidence in the international student (Abels & Reese-Smith, 2008; Swagler & Ellis, 2003). Compared to international students outside of the helping professions, these sociocultural factors likely have different impacts for international students in psychology programs given the interpersonal nature of mental health programs.

International students also encounter unique barriers when it comes to pursuing clinical training outside of their university because they must first apply for Curricular Practical Training (CPT). CPT is a required internship or practicum that a sponsoring employer offers through agreements with an international students’ university (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration

Services, 2020). After completing their graduate coursework, those who want to receive employment authorization to continue their clinical practice in the U.S., must also apply for Optional Practical Training (OPT). OPT is a one-time special status that allows international students to work usually for 12 months with approval from their university's International Student Office (ISO) (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2020).

International students may also encounter different career barriers if they plan to return to their country of origin upon completion of their academic program. This is because their degree training (e.g., training on sociocultural issues with specific cultural populations) and professional licensure may not be transferable or readily applicable to their home country (Alvarez & Lee, 2012; Lau & Ng, 2012). The vocational challenges associated with returning home may include developing a country-specific curriculum vitae, planning and preparing for re-entry, and limited familiarity with the professional and mental health systems of their country of origin.

Coping Efficacy

Although earlier research has identified a range of career barriers for international students (Reynolds & Constantine, 2007), much less empirical attention has been directed toward understanding international students' coping efficacy as it relates to their career barriers. It is important that researchers learn more about international students' sense of agency in the face of career barriers, and how this agency is connected to their intentions and behaviors. As previously described, coping efficacy is defined as an individual's belief in their ability to manage or negotiate obstacles that emerge (Lent et al., 1994).

Self-efficacy (i.e., people's beliefs in their capabilities to produce given attainments; Bandura, 1997), a construct related to coping efficacy has gained considerable empirical attention. Studies have examined international students' domain-specific self-efficacy (e.g., social self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, job search self-efficacy), and have linked higher

domain-specific efficacy with better social, academic, career, and adjustment outcomes among international students (Çankaya et al., 2017; Lee & Ciftci, 2014; Lin & Betz, 2007; Lin & Flores, 2011). Although studies have examined international students' self-efficacy, the coping efficacy of master's international students in counseling psychology programs, remains largely unexamined. It is unclear *what* coping efficacy beliefs they possess and *how* those efficacy beliefs come about. A qualitative study on international students' coping efficacy in the context of career barriers may add to the current literature and provide a more nuanced exploration of how efficacy beliefs and personal agency manifest in the context of these barriers.

The Present Study

Informed by two specific components of SCCT (i.e., career barriers and coping efficacy) and the foregoing literature, this study explored perceived career barriers and coping efficacy among master's counseling psychology international students. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the authors responded to the call to use diverse methodologies to understand career barriers and coping efficacy among understudied populations (Lent et al., 2000), including analyses at the fine-grained level (Lent et al., 2018). Qualitative research may provide a fine-grained understanding of career barriers, including different perceptions between individuals (Lent et al., 2000). Qualitative research is important because “supports, opportunities, and barriers—like beauty—lie at least partly in the eye of the beholder” (Lent et al., 1994, p. 106).

Method

Participants

Following receipt of IRB approval, the first author emailed 75 faculty members across 20 psychology departments in California to request help with participant recruitment. Faculty members were asked to send invitation emails to potential interviewees with a brief description of the purpose of the study. The first author then corresponded with those interested in

participating. Participants were recruited using purposeful and snowball sampling (Marshall, 1996; Patton, 1990) with the following inclusion criteria: (a) currently enrolled as a full-time international student in a master's counseling psychology program in California, (b) and students on an F-1 visa. An F-1 visa allows individuals from other countries to enter the U.S. as a full-time student at an accredited college, university, or related academic institution.

Twelve master's counseling psychology international students representing 9 countries were recruited for this qualitative study (i.e., Brazil, India, Singapore, Chile, Nigeria, South Korea, Sweden, China, and the Philippines; see Table 2 for demographic information). Nine identified as cisgender female and three identified as cisgender male. Their ages ranged from 24 to 59 years old with an average age of 32 years old and a standard deviation of 10.97 for age. All moved to the U.S. between 2008 and 2019. Six participants moved to the U.S. to pursue a master's degree in counseling psychology and six participants first moved to the U.S. to pursue other studies. One participant moved to the U.S. as a high school student, two as undergraduate students in psychology, and three completed master's degrees in non-mental health fields before enrolling in counseling psychology graduate programs. The participants were from eight different counseling psychology programs. Two participants attended public institutions and 10 attended private institutions. Three were in the first-year, five were in the second-year, and four were in the third-year of their program. Their grade point average (GPA) ranged from 3.5 to 4.0. Four of them were participating in clinical practicum training at the time of the interview.

Materials

A demographic questionnaire was used to collect data on gender, academic performance, age, nationality, and clinical experience. A semi-structured interview protocol with 14 open-ended questions was used to collect information on participants' cognitive-person (i.e., outcome expectations and goals) and environmental (i.e., barriers and support) variables as well as their

coping efficacy (see Appendix). The interview protocol was developed to gather data on participants' career barriers (e.g., *As an international student pursuing a career in counseling psychology in the U.S., what would you say are the major stressors or career barriers that you have encountered?*) and coping efficacy (e.g., *What are some steps that you have taken in order to manage career stress or barriers related to being here on an international student visa?*).

Procedure

All participants completed a written informed consent form and a demographic questionnaire in Qualtrics, an online survey tool. After participants signed and completed the informed consent and demographic forms, a video conference interview was conducted. All interviews were conducted and recorded by the first author, a licensed counseling psychologist with qualitative training. Interviews lasted between 50 minutes to 1.5 hours, and were conducted between December 2019 to February 2020. All audio recordings and respective verbatim transcriptions were saved in an encrypted file on Tresorit, an online cloud storage system. Each student was given a pseudonym and all identifying markers were removed from the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

The authors selected Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis (TA) as an analytic method for this study because it provides accessible and rigorous procedures for generating codes and crafting themes from qualitative data. Braun and Clarke (2016) describe themes as patterns of meaning that are "actively crafted by the researcher, reflecting their interpretative choices, instead of pre-existing the analysis" process (p. 740). While qualitative methods such as phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003) and conversation analysis (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998) provide limited flexibility in how the analytic method is used, TA provides both theoretical freedom and rigor (Braun & Clark, 2006).

The researchers used an inductive (data-driven) and deductive approach (SCCT theory-guided) to the TA. This hybrid approach allowed for themes to emerge directly from the data while allowing two constructs from SCCT, career barriers and coping efficacy, to be integral to the process of deductive thematic analysis. A deductive approach was used to look for patterns of meaning related to career barriers and barrier coping efficacy. An inductive approach was used to code the data without consideration for themes that earlier international student and career development research may have previously identified. The researchers independently read participants' responses multiple times, generated initial codes, and searched for common themes. To understand the experiences of participants in navigating and coping with career barriers, the researchers independently coded the data with labels representing participants' experiences, thoughts, and beliefs. Subsequently, the coding team came together to (a) discuss coding similarities and differences, (b) revise the codes, (c) collapse and cluster the codes that shared unifying features, (d) and review the individually identified themes. At the conclusion of this process, ten themes under two focus areas were generated (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Researchers' Positionality and Trustworthiness

The coding team consisted of the first, second, and third author, all educators in a counseling psychology program in California. The first author is a cisgender Queer Latinx woman from Mexico and an assistant professor. The second author is an Asian cisgender woman from Taiwan and an associate professor. The third author is a biracial cisgender woman from the U.S. and an assistant professor. The first and second author immigrated to the U.S. on an F-1 visa and the third author is an American citizen. The researchers have formal thematic analysis training and experience working with master's counseling psychology international students.

Reflexivity was necessary for the researchers to consider how their worldview about the international student experience may have affected the data analysis process. Given that the

researchers reside and teach in California, the focus of the study was on understanding the experiences of international students in counseling psychology programs within that state. Each researcher recognized that their personal experiences with international students likely shaped their understanding of participants' interview responses. Considering that two of the three researchers were former international students, biases throughout all stages of the study were discussed. For example, when designing the interview protocol, the researchers flagged and excluded leading questions that would push participants in the direction of probable outcomes. To enhance the trustworthiness of this study, each researcher documented her own impressions as well as reactions and insights into a memo file connected to each participant's transcript. Reflection and documentation were used to monitor and reflect on potential biases related to shared identities with participants. Independent coding and peer debriefing between the three researchers offered a system of checks and balances to cross-validate each other's interpretations and to explore blind spots in the interpretation of the data. Modifications to the codebook were recorded including changes to codes and themes.

Results

Two focus areas and ten themes, five themes under each focus area were found.

Focus Area. International Journey with Multiple Barriers

Participants encountered a variety of barriers in their educational and/or clinical training experiences as international students; namely, (a) interpersonal stress, (b) language barriers, (c) financial pressures, (d) advising concerns, and (e) visa and immigration related stress.

Theme one. Interpersonal stress. All 12 participants expressed interpersonal stress as a result of acculturation concerns and the low international student representation in their academic program. Nine participants attributed interpersonal stress to their limited social interaction with domestic students. They explained that their limited social interaction hindered their ability to

establish more meaningful relationships with domestic students which, in turn, exacerbated feelings of disconnection and loneliness. These nine participants expressed a desire to form more cohesive and satisfying relationships with them. Four participants associated interpersonal stress with feeling alienated and ‘othered’ by domestic students. Kim, for example, explained that being perceived “as different” by classmates on the basis of her accent resulted in social interactions that were “superficial” in nature, which made her feel alienated:

I have a limited relationship with my classmates. It’s not going deeper or maybe sometimes it’s just superficial. We don’t really talk to each other; they already see me different from [because of] my accent. (Kim, South Korea, 36 years old)

Elena stated that the sociocultural differences that exist between her and domestic students generate interpersonal stress and complicate her acculturation process. She stated that her preference for collectivism differs from domestic students’ individualistic approach to maintaining friendships; an approach that values the interest of the individual rather than the group. She indicated that these differences influence her perception of those friendships as “disposable,” which makes her feel alone and homesick:

The difference in collectivism and individualism has been huge. I feel so alone until this day even though I have friends...No sé [I don’t know] como que [like] I feel like friendships are “desechables” [disposable]. (Elena, Chile, 29 years old)

The nine participants that attributed interpersonal stress to their limited social interaction with domestic students explained that these limited opportunities for social interaction are, in part, due to domestic students’ rigorous employment and family demands. They described their own schedules as more “open” and “available” given the work restrictions associated with their F-1 visa status. They added that the geographic distance and time-zone differences that exist

between international students and their family members, lower their family demands and free their schedule. Elaborating on domestic students' busy work agendas, Jimmy stated:

I feel like my classmates are all busy with their work. I feel like, out of class, we don't have a lot of time to spend together because they have to work...There's like [a] disconnection somehow. (Jimmy, China, 24 years old)

All 12 participants indicated that the lack of international student representation in their academic program concomitant with the limited knowledge that domestic students and faculty members have about international student concerns, often makes them feel unsupported.

Theme 2. Language barriers. With the exception of Laura, Melissa, and Jessica (who are fluent in English), nine participants identified language barriers as being related to adjustment difficulties, second language anxiety, and lower self-confidence. These participants shared that language barriers negatively impacted how they completed writing assignments; worked on case presentations; provided clinical services in English; and how they were perceived by faculty members, therapy clients, and clinical supervisors based on their accents, grammatical "errors," and different communications styles.

Gustavo explained that his "limited English-fluency," especially during his first-year of coursework, lowered his social confidence, impacted his participation in class and interaction with classmates, and the time it took for him to complete course assignments:

The language barrier made me feel a little bit uncomfortable participate[ing] in class. I'm the kind of person that I can build relationship[s] pretty easy[ly], but I think it was just the language, it's really hard to put yourself out [there] and also the reading process which took me a little longer than normal. (Gustavo, Brazil, 28 years old)

Kim explained that language barriers together with "shame culture" and cultural expectations of high achievement, have negatively influenced her class presentations. She stated:

When I have presentations, I feel really anxiety [anxious] because my English is not perfect or good enough. I think that's from my cultural stuff that we are based on shamed culture and we have to perform more all the time in Korea as much as perfect. (Kim, South Korea, 36 years old)

Participants in their year of clinical training indicated that second-language anxiety impacted their confidence when working with therapy clients and clinical supervisors. Jenny expressed concerns that clients would “twist” her words and that errors in their interpretation would consequently impact their mental health and wellbeing:

With my English, I worry about some words and grammar...I'm just concerned if I say something wrong, that it will be twist[ed] [in]to arguments, or affect [the wellbeing of] my patient[s] in the future. (Jenny, China, 25 years old)

Theme 3. Financial pressures. All 12 participants endorsed financial pressures, which included one or a combination of the following: their ineligibility for direct financial aid from the government; paying high tuition fees and limited scholarship opportunities; facing employment restrictions such as being barred from off-campus employment and having limited on-campus employment opportunities; relying on others for financial support; and feeling pressured to find clinical sites that offer financial compensation or incentives to clinical trainees.

Daniel explained that his difficulties finding on-campus employment coexist with his inability to access U.S. loans and financial aid. These financial pressures have impacted his ability to pay academic tuition fees, which he fears will interfere with degree completion:

The F-1 visa does not allow you to work as a student. They say if you must work, it has to be within campus. In most cases, the school don't have enough work to go around, and if they do have, they want to give [the job] to their own citizens first before an international student. (Daniel, Nigeria, 59 years old)

All participants expressed feeling pressure to experience career success given their personal and/or family's economic and emotional sacrifices. Melissa described her reliance on her parents' financial support as a significant stressor influencing her academic experience:

It [the stress] has been more about not being allowed to work or [financially] support myself. Having to rely on either a student loan or my parents to help me out financially to survive or pay rent or have food on the table. (Melissa, Sweden, 25 years old)

To alleviate financial pressures, participants in their first two years of their master's program expressed a desire to pursue clinical training at sites where trainees are awarded some form of financial incentive for their clinical services. Rupa, for example, reported:

For me, it is important that there is a practicum site where they do pay some stipend or some scholarship which would be supportive of us especially being an international student and not having any other income. (Rupa, India, 48 years old)

Theme 4. Advising concerns. All 12 participants endorsed advising concerns, which included: (a) the limited understanding that faculty members have about the federal regulations that dictate how international students may work and intern as mental health clinicians, (b) the limited knowledge that staff members at the International Students Office have about the clinical requirements for graduation and professional licensure, (c) and the limited time that professors have for advising appointments due to their busy professional schedules.

Participants shared that while faculty members are helpful in addressing general educational-vocational concerns, they are often inadequately equipped to answer questions at the intersection of education, career, and immigration. They said this pressures them to seek information about CPT, OPT, and work visas at the International Students Office. Laura indicated that when she discloses visa related anxiety to her faculty advisors, including concerns

about whether she will successfully fulfill all of the clinical requirements for professional licensure during the OPT period, they “always” refer her to the International Students Office:

She pretty much always just refers me to the International Students Office, so I feel like she’s not very knowledgeable about it. I feel like it’s always being passed on, so I haven’t met a professor in my program who really knows about the international student experience, or the process of OPT, CPT, H-1B. (Laura, Philippines, 24 years old)

Elaborating on the disconnection between staff at the International Students Office and faculty members in counseling psychology departments, Rupa stated:

When it comes to the visa issues and such things, we’re directed towards the ISS [International Students Office]. I thought that I would be guided to go through all the processes by my [faculty] advisor or from the [counseling psychology] department, but I found that there was a little bit of disconnection. (Rupa, India, 48 years old)

Participants indicated that further collaboration between staff at the International Students Office and counseling psychology faculty is necessary to improve their advising experiences.

Theme 5. Visa and immigration-related stress. All 12 participants reported feeling anxious about the relatively short OPT period to meet the clinical requirements for professional licensure. With the exception of two participants with plans to return to their home country after graduation, all other participants reported stress related to the scarcity of H-1B visas (which allows employers to hire graduate level workers in specialty occupations). Four participants expressed feeling pressured to establish a strong relationship with clinical staff at their practicum site with hopes of being sponsored for an H-1B visa upon completion of their clinical practicum.

All 12 participants stated that obtaining professional licensure would strengthen their qualifications for employment in the U.S. or their home country. They explained that even if they could not use a U.S. license to practice in their country of origin, adding their license to their

resume would increase their competitiveness in their country's job market. Laura said she recently realized that accruing all of her "client contact hours" during the 12-month OPT period would be more complicated than she previously expected, which has exacerbated her anxiety:

I actually calculated this with my international student advisor. She said, even if I work like 40 hours a week, I won't reach the 3,000 cap [clinical requirement for professional licensure in California] in a year. (Laura, Philippines, 24 years old)

With the exception of two participants with plans to return home after graduation, first and second year students expressed interest in searching for and applying for positions at practicum sites with histories of sponsoring H-1B visas. Rupa explained, "I have this agenda that I'd rather do practicum or traineeship at a site which has the chance of probably sponsoring the visa [H-1B]." In order to increase their chances of H-1B visa sponsorship, those hoping to remain in the U.S. expressed a desire to strengthen their professional qualifications in ways that would distinguish them from applicants with U.S. citizenship. Karen explained that being a competitive candidate for clinical jobs, is important because H-1B visas are scarce:

Now, you have to provide additional materials to prove that you are the one that qualify[ies] for this title, this job, this pay. [That] You're not taking [an] American's job...I think they're just nitpicking about everything. I do know a lot of friends, they got denied [after applying for an H-1B visa], which is insane...I got this experience because of Trump. It's not because we don't deserve [being] here or because of our nationality. It's just because the administration changed the policy on that [increased denials of H-1B visas]. (Karen, China, 30 years old)

The participants with a desire to transition from a temporary F-1 visa to a long-term visa, explained that this desire often distracts them from their academic and professional pursuits. For Rupa, visa stress interferes with her cultural adjustment to U.S. culture:

How I am [am I] to accrue so many hours to write [to be eligible] for the licensing [licensure] exam?... I am still acculturating and when I have to think about my visa stuff and everything, that takes away my freedom to fully experience a culture in terms of understanding what goes on. (Rupa, India, 48 years old)

Focus Area 2. Agents of Change in the Midst of Barriers

Under the second focus area, the researchers found the following five themes: (a) self-regulating, (b) stepping into discomfort, (c) cognitive reappraising, (b) becoming a change agent, and (c) social support seeking. Participants explained that through the use of these coping strategies and supports, they saw themselves as capable agents of change who possess resources and capabilities that facilitate their navigation of career barriers.

Theme 1. Self-regulating. All 12 participants explained that with the support of [one or more of the following], exercise, rest, prayer, spiritual practices, counseling, catharsis, and communication with friends and family, they felt capable of defending themselves against some of the negative effects of career barriers. Jenny uses yoga and meditation, Jimmy plays basketball, Melissa goes on nature walks, Jessica streams TV shows, Daniel and Kim tap into prayer and faith, Gustavo and Jenny rely on their university's counseling and psychological services center for support, and Rupa, Laura, and Kavita communicate with family members when overwhelmed. Participants said they felt confident that if they actively self-monitored their stress levels and practiced self-care in a disciplined manner, they would be able to boost their sense of hope in the midst of career barriers, and prevent the disruption of career progress.

Theme 2. Stepping into discomfort. All 12 participants recognized that stepping into discomfort facilitated personal growth and transformation within the classroom, in the therapy room, and in other professional spaces. They understood that if they failed to venture and experiment outside of their familiar world, they would miss out on the career experiences that

studying in the U.S. can offer. Karen explained that her strong desire to graduate and become a licensed professional, motivates her to step into the discomfort of uncertainty, “be brave, and face [her] fears head on.” She expressed confidence that she would be able to overcome interpersonal challenges, academic conflict, or clinical crises if she took healthy risks.

Participants explained that if their engagement in calculated risk-taking led to the accomplishment of a career goal, they felt more confident and empowered. For example, Jessica challenged the myths and dominant social discourses associated with Asian-identified international students at a national conference for psychologists, which she said helped her feel stronger and more confident about her professional skills. In her presentation, she promoted the idea that Asian-identified international students can also succeed and thrive outside of the Science, Technology, Education, and Math (STEM) fields, such as in mental health disciplines:

I actually ended up presenting at a conference at the [blind for confidentiality] Psychological Association around this, how there’s just so much pressure...there’s so much pressure in America and a lot of assumptions made by Asian-identified people that this [STEM] is the only career path that we will ever be good at.

Theme 3. Cognitive reappraising. All 12 participants generated new perspectives when looking at career barriers and found positive meaning in the struggles experienced. For instance, Karen felt that her exposure to sociocultural differences and microaggressions in her academic program, although painful, provided growth opportunities that reinforced her cultural and national identity. She explained that she found new meaning in her cultural values, traditions, and accent and saw them as connected to her authentic self: She stated:

Nowadays, I feel like just being myself. My identity, my language, I can show as much Chinese as I want because that’s me. I don’t need to pretend to be—It’s not pretend, you don’t need to be Americanized because that’s not you. (Karen, China, 30 years old)

Elena reported that although she often feels stressed due to language barriers, she considers her decision to study counseling psychology in a second-language to be “courageous.” She explained that placing her attention on her courage, rather than the challenges she experiences due to language difficulties, motivates her to continue pursuing her career goals. Today, when she introduces herself to others, she underlines that she is an international student:

The first thing I tell people is, “Hello, my name is Elena. I am from Chile and I am an international student.” I feel so proud of that. (Elena, Chile, 29 years old)

Theme 4. Becoming a change agent. All 12 participants saw themselves as change-agents who through brainstorming, personal goal-setting, and problem resolution, could better cope with or overcome career barriers. They saw themselves as being capable of decreasing rumination and catastrophizing by implementing action toward their desired goals. Kavita stated that she feels more prepared for “the stressors to come” when she adopts the role of an active participant who is “on top of things” rather than a passive viewer who uncontrollably ruminates:

What helps is just staying on top of things. Hoping for the best, preparing for the worst... I just need to follow plan A, plan B, plan C. (Kavita, India, 30 years old)

Participants felt confident organizing and executing actions in the direction of their career goals. For example, hoping to address the limited student diversity in her counseling psychology program, Jessica joined the diversity committee at her university. She stated that her participation in this committee helps to strengthen her sense of agency:

I decided to join the diversity committee and try to change things systematically. I felt that if I changed things for future people of color at [name of university], then I would be more content with myself...I thought, the way I can get through this master’s degree is by making sure that this experience doesn’t happen to other people of color here. (Jessica, Singapore, 24 years old)

Daniel, for example, perceives prayer to be a tool that helps with problem resolution. Whenever he feels overwhelmed by career barriers, he and his family “call out” for “God’s help” and engage in prayer. Daniel reported that if he prays, God listens, and change happens. He expressed feeling confident in the power of his prayers:

Yes, that’s what we do, we engage in prayers, we try to engage ourselves with scriptures... There is danger when you keep things to yourself [because] one begins to have internal damage. I always call out for help. (Daniel, Nigeria, 59 years old)

Theme 5. Social support seeking. All 12 participants indicated that the emotional and instrumental support from meaningful relationships in their home country and in the U.S, is critical to their wellbeing, career satisfaction, and career success. They identified seeking support from one or more of the following sources: friends, family members, romantic partners, supportive professors and advisors, and other international students. They stated that receiving validation, guidance, reassurance, and encouragement from their support system, helps them to feel more positive about their career experiences.

For Melissa, whenever she is feeling stressed about career barriers, she asks for support from her parents, her boyfriend, and her boyfriend’s family. In response, they offer strategies and possible solutions to her career concerns, which she indicated helps to keep her on track toward her career goals. Whenever she feels overwhelmed by stress, her support system encourages her to relax and “have fun.” She stated:

Well, I do have a boyfriend here. His family has been an amazing support for me. I also talk to my parents every day and they’re really good people to just bounce ideas off of and just brainstorm and talk about multiple different [career] scenarios. (Melissa, Sweden, 25 years old)

Three participants spoke about the importance of having faculty members who show interest in the stressors that impact international students. Kavita spoke about feeling validated by one faculty member:

The first person in my department [who expressed interest in learning about international student concerns] was my practicum supervisor, [name of supervisor]. She sat down with me and she said, “No, tell me, what is it? How do you spell it? So, it’s called Curricular Practical Training,” and I was like, “Wow, this [is] the first person who’s taken up [the] time to understand.” (Kavita, India, 30 years old)

Three participants identified seeking support from other international students as essential. Kavita, for instance, sought support from other international students using social media. She explained:

We formed a group on Facebook and so every international student literally directs their answers over there or questions over there. All of us are really good, strong community over there... I’ve heard from my community of international students that there are a couple of sites that... have sponsored visas in the past. (Kavita, India, 30 years old)

Two participants explained that they valued the presence of foreign-born professors because they feel represented and understood. For instance, Karen sought support from faculty members with previous migration experiences. She stated: “[Name of professor], she’s from an immigrant family...I do feel that because of this diverse group of professors, they provide a lot of different perspectives.”

Discussion

The present study examined contextual career barriers and coping efficacy among master’s level counseling psychology international students, an understudied population whose career experiences and concerns have largely been missing in prior literature. This study made

unique and incremental contributions to the career development and counseling psychology literature by addressing a call to use diverse methodologies (Lent et al., 2000) such as thematic analysis to study SCCT constructs. It also filled a gap in SCCT research by examining *both* career barriers and coping efficacy in one study—a dual focus necessary to understanding not only the obstacles but also the efficacy and strengths that individuals, particularly, minoritized groups, maneuver in their career journey (Lent et al., 2000). Although this study focuses on master’s international students in counseling psychology programs, findings may contribute to our understanding of master’s international students in other mental health programs.

Perceived Contextual Career Barriers

Our findings indicate a range of career barriers perceived by master’s counseling psychology international students. Students described stressors in the interpersonal and social domain, such as alienation, acculturation difficulties, and isolation. They perceived these barriers as obstacles that hinder their capacity to function at their desired academic, clinical, or professional level. Similar to previous studies (Knox et al., 2013; Rahman & Rollock, 2004), four out of 12 participants described experiences of feeling “othered” by domestic students (i.e., being categorized as different and an outsider, and little inclusion in typical social connections). Participants explained that most of their interactions with domestic students were required by a course or on a superficial level, which heightened feelings of acculturation stress and overall loneliness and isolation. Additionally, participants perceived interpersonal stressors as obstacles that may limit opportunities to become familiar with the sociocultural rules and expectations of the host culture and/or hinder the development of relational assets for future employment opportunities. This finding is consistent with research that indicates that the social integration of international students into the host culture enhances their overall wellbeing (Zhang & Goodson, 2011a) and reduces their employment barriers (Lu et al., 2018). Perhaps the larger class sizes in

master's psychology programs compared to doctoral programs, further limits opportunities for more intimate interaction between students.

This study's findings also suggest that an additional interpersonal barrier is international students' perceptions of domestic students as having rigorous employment and family demands that limit opportunities for social interaction. Thus, master's psychology programs may benefit from developing initiatives and class activities that strengthen cohort dynamics and offer opportunities for closer interaction between domestic and international students as this may help facilitate their social integration. Although interpersonal stressors may apply to doctoral level students, their experiences may differ because doctoral programs often discourage their students from maintaining full-time employment while pursuing their degree, which may result in more social interaction opportunities between domestic and international students.

Language differences were also a barrier reported, which is an obstacle frequently found in studies with international students (Lee, 2017; Lu et al., 2018; Zhang & Goodson, 2011b). Like prior studies, language barriers posed significant academic and adjustment difficulties for participants (e.g., not being able to fully express oneself in class or obtain the highest grades on a written paper). Language barriers intertwined with acculturation stress and interpersonal isolation appeared to heighten the interpersonal "othering" already experienced by participants in their social contexts. Our study revealed a nuanced understanding of how students perceived the impact of language barriers on their clinical training and professional development. Specifically, participants experienced anxiety when using a second language to conduct counseling sessions. They expressed concern about how their language differences may be perceived negatively by faculty members, counseling clients, and clinical supervisors. Given the shorter duration of master's programs compared to doctoral programs, master's students have a shorter period of time to adjust to the language and culture of the host country than their doctoral counterparts.

Financial pressures and visa and immigration-related stress also emerged as career barriers in our study. Specifically, participants noted how their status as international students limited their financial aid, scholarship, and on-campus employment opportunities, as well as ineligibility for off-campus employment. This finding is consistent with literature indicating that international students are restricted to off-campus employment due to F-1 visa limitations. This means that their work experience can be substantially limited (Park-Saltzman et al., 2012). Although financial employment restrictions apply to doctoral students, these stressors may be less pronounced for them (compared to master's students) because opportunities like tuition waivers and research or teaching assistantships are more frequently offered in doctoral programs.

Related to financial barriers were visa and immigration stressors, particularly in the contexts of accruing hours for licensure, work visa sponsorship, and uncertainties related to immigration policies. Participants indicated concerns about how the short duration of the OPT period (i.e., typically 12 months) would make it difficult to accrue the hour requirement for licensure in California (i.e., 3,000 hours). Students' anxiety and stress around their visa status were also palpable. Ten out of 12 participants noted desires for a work visa (i.e., H-1B), which would require an employer's willingness to sponsor a visa application. Concerns about degree transferability and training applicability for career options outside of the U.S. (e.g., returning to home country) were also reported. Under multiple sources of stress and uncertainties related to visa, immigration, and global transferability of education, participants reported interferences induced by these stressors in their academic, professional, and overall adjustment. Largely, these findings are consistent with literature on doctoral level counseling psychology students (Çiftçi & Williams-Nickelson, 2008). These uncertainties are also exacerbated due to quickly changing policies at the federal level. Under the Trump administration, increased barriers have been imposed to make it more difficult for international students and employees to study and work in

the U.S. (e.g., restrictions placed on H-1B visas; Redden, 2020). These changes reflect a hostility towards international students and others in the academic community, which only serve to create more barriers and threaten efforts to create a more inclusive and vibrant learning space.

Concerns around visa and immigration related barriers were reflected in students' desire for better coordination between faculty advisors in their academic department and the International Student Office on college campuses. Participants expressed wishes for more tangible guidance from their academic advisors on federal regulations related to their eligibility to work and intern as mental health clinicians. While some students saw their academic advisor as primarily responsible for general academic/professional consultation, many indicated a desire for their advisors to be more familiar about international students' practical stressors (e.g., CPT, OPT). Students expressed more concern regarding the tasks-specific aspects of advising (e.g., familiarity with international student visa issues) rather than the interpersonal aspects of advising. This may be because participants were from master's programs in which a thesis or a qualifying project were not required for graduation. When compared to doctoral level programs where students typically have more one-on-one time with their advisors to work on research projects, meetings with advisors may not typically occur as frequently in master's programs. In addition, given that master's programs have higher student enrollment and larger class lectures than doctoral programs, the higher advisor to student ratio may make those interactions more limited. Thus, master's students may see the limited time with their advisor as most important for addressing their most tangible questions, such as visa concerns.

This study's findings concerning contextual career barriers are consistent with the environmental hypotheses within the SCCT framework (Lent et al., 1994, 2000). More specifically, the contextual barriers reported by participants seemed most aligned with proximal contextual influences on career behaviors outlined in SCCT (e.g., influence of immigration

restrictions on goal setting for work visa pursuits). The prominence of proximal contextual barriers in participants' narratives echoes SCCT's assertion that proximal contextual influences are critically important when individuals are actively engaged in career or educational decision making (Lent et al., 2000), like participants in this study were. It should be noted that within two themes of the contextual barriers in this study (i.e., interpersonal stress and language barriers), there appeared to be personal factors at play. The "disconnection and loneliness" code within the interpersonal stress theme and the "second-language anxiety" code within the language barrier theme, may reflect some personal or dispositional qualities rather than completely objective, external context-based barriers. Of course, there likely was a person-environment interplay (e.g., being in a second-language environment worsened one's preexisting anxiety and vice versa), as acknowledged by SCCT in distinguishing between personal and contextual factors (Lent et al., 2000). A clear conceptual distinction may prove to be empirically difficult because of the inter-embeddedness of personal and contextual contributions in shaping the social cognitive construction of career barriers in the participants' narratives. As such, this study's findings build upon but also gently challenge SCCT to further articulate how the construct of contextual barriers may be distinguished from personal influences, both theoretically and empirically.

Coping Efficacy

This study found that participants actively engaged in behavioral (e.g., self-care practices, strategizing problem solving) and cognitive (e.g., calculated risk-taking, cognitive reappraisal) coping processes as they navigated through their educational and training journey. As postulated by SCCT, participants appeared to draw from past positive career learning experiences to strengthen their sense of efficacy and outcome expectations in the face of challenges and difficulties posed by contextual barriers. For example, participants reported how they chose to step out of their comfort zone to venture into the unknown because they believed this would

eventually further their personal and professional development. Perhaps the very act of leaving home and coming to a new country to pursue one's education serves as a positive learning experience that fuels positive coping efficacy in the face of contextual barriers.

Findings also indicate that cognitive reappraisal was a powerful process that illuminated how participants developed and exerted coping efficacy. Participants reflected on how they approached barriers related to sociocultural differences, language difficulties, and microaggressions with a growth mind-set, which furthered a sense of pride in their own national and cultural identity. While some described initially trying to "hide" differences, they eventually honored their cultural heritage and celebrated the authenticity of their being. These findings concur with previous research that found that students' definition of good adjustment shifted from assimilation to self-acceptance the longer they stayed in the U.S. (Lu et al., 2018).

Intertwined with cognitive reappraisal and coping efficacy beliefs were participants' views of self as a change-agent with confidence in organizing and executing actions in the direction of their career goals. Their ability to seek and receive emotional support played an important role in sustaining and strengthening their coping efficacy. Although they reported "disconnected" and "superficial" relationships with domestic students (e.g., they endorsed partners, friends, family members, or other international students as important sources of support, which reinforced their ability to cope and adjust. They also expressed appreciation for faculty with interest in understanding international student stressors. They found the presence of foreign-born faculty who represented their cultural diversity to be affirming and relatable.

Overall, findings illustrate SCCT's (Lent et al., 2000) core depiction of the active phenomenological process that individuals exert in their personal beliefs, cognitions, and meaning making to engage with their environments and strive, knowingly or unknowingly, toward developing a sense of mastery and self-agency. Previous studies with international

students have largely focused on domain-specific efficacy (e.g., job-search self-efficacy; Lin & Flores, 2011), but limited research has taken beyond a domain-specific approach to understand international students' efficacy in coping with career barriers. Therefore, our study builds on SCCT theory and extends the empirical literature by capturing international students' coping efficacy as they navigated through the broad range of career barriers.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, despite efforts to recruit a diverse pool of participants, two thirds of our participants were from Asia and nine were women. Although this racial and gender demographic is consistent with participant demographics reported in studies with doctoral counseling psychology international students (e.g., Knox et al., 2013), the findings may not best represent male and non-Asian international students' experiences. For example, language barriers and ethnoracial related microaggressions may not be salient themes for international students from English-speaking or Western countries. Within-group variations were also not analyzed in the present report (e.g., Chinese vs. Indian within the umbrella group of Asian international students). Second, because all participants were international students in California, their experiences may not be representative of international students outside of this state. Third, most participants reported positive functioning and adjustment, with little report of mental health concerns. While this may be a real indication of their coping efficacy, the possibility of social desirability could not be ruled out as participants knew that the interviewer was a faculty member in a counseling psychology department. Related research with international (non-counseling psychology) graduate students has found that it is not uncommon that international students resort to maladaptive coping (e.g., cigarette smoking) in the face of stressors and barriers (Lu et al., 2018). It is unknown whether participants in this study were generally better at self-regulation (e.g., applying their mental health knowledge and skills to

themselves) than the overall international student body. Fourth, two members of the research team had a background as international students themselves, which may have influenced how they coded the data and interpretation of the themes and subthemes. In addition, the third researcher has had no personal experiences as an international student and may have been more inclined to follow the lead of the other two researchers given her lack of personal knowledge on the subject. Finally, it is unknown to what degree these findings are influenced by participants' dispositional affect (i.e., their tendency to experience positive or negative emotions).

Implications for Practice, Advocacy, and Future Research

Findings from this study hold important implications for mentoring, advising, advocacy, counseling, and future research. Similar to findings with doctoral international students, this study emphasizes the importance for advisors to consistently attend to their international advisees' concerns regarding language issues, acculturation stress, sociocultural barriers, and overall professional and personal development (Knox et al., 2013; Park-Saltzman et al., 2012). Advisors and academic programs are challenged to better inform themselves on visa and immigration-related stipulations and restrictions; this is especially important given the Trump administration's increased restrictions and barriers imposed on international students (Redden, 2020). It is of utmost importance for advisors, academic departments, and international students to maintain frequent communications with the International Student Office on campus so that tangible and concerted support are provided to students. This kind of concrete support seems especially important for master's international students because of the multiple successive visa related stressors many of them may face within a brief two to three-year timeframe, particularly if they desire to pursue employment in the U.S., as noted by ten of our participants. If information and guidance on visa and immigration-related issues are out of the scope of practice of academic advisors, this should be clearly communicated to students at the time of new student

orientation and referral resources should be specific and thorough. Mentors, advisors, and academic departments are charged with commitment and responsibility to fully implement cultural appreciation, inter-cultural learning, and advocacy initiatives so that international students are welcomed, celebrated, and protected. Perhaps programs should consider adopting a new type of orientation program that supports coping with stress related to organizational entry and cultural entry (Fan & Wanous, 2008). Academic institutions must also advocate for a fuller and humanizing appreciation of international students' career development and should be prepared to file lawsuits opposing proposed rulings that threaten international students' right to pursue an education in the U.S., even if the lawsuits are filed against the federal government.

Counseling services should intentionally provide platforms for international students to share their career challenges as well as how they cope and overcome barriers with efficacy. This emphasis could, in turn, enhance self-empowerment and further self-efficacy. Counselors must understand international students as whole beings who experience ups and downs and obstacles and successes—rather than a forever “other.” Outreach programs on topics related to career barriers and coping mechanisms at events like international student orientations could help prepare students as they embark on their academic, training, and career journeys (Fan & Wanous, 2008). Finally, because some international students may develop a sense of agency in the midst of career barriers as indicated in our findings, counseling centers and international student centers should consider recruiting international students as peer mentors and educators to support and guide incoming international students.

Future research should consider exploring whether and how participants' perceived capability to navigate career barriers have changed due to recent rulings (Redden, 2020), such as the Trump administration rule requiring international students to leave the U.S. if their schools held online-only classes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Table 1*Differences between Master's and Doctoral Level Programs and International Students*

Domain	Master's Level	Doctoral Level
Acceptance rates, class size, advisor to student ratio	Acceptance rates are higher. More students per cohort, which may limit opportunities for more intimate interaction between students and students and advisor	Acceptance rates are lower. Fewer students per cohort, which may facilitate more intimate interaction between students and advisor (lower advisor to student ratio)
Duration of program	Approximately 2-3 years. Shorter period of time to adjust to the language and culture of the host country prior to job market	Approximately 5-6 years. More time to adjust to the language and culture of the host country prior to job market
Scope of training, career goals, and title	Train students for clinical careers. Career goals may include the pursuit of clinical licensure, certification, or employment after graduation. Title after licensure may be counselor or marriage and family therapist	Train students for clinical practice, research, teaching, testing, assessment, and consultation. Students' career goals may be to pursue clinical practice, teaching, or research after graduation. Title after licensure is psychologist
Peer social interaction	Domestic students often have rigorous employment and family demands that limit opportunities for peer social interaction outside of class	Students are often discouraged from maintaining full-time employment, which may create more opportunities for peer social interaction outside of class
Financial aid	May experience more limited financial aid, scholarship, and on-campus employment opportunities	Although off campus employment is limited, tuition waivers and research/teaching assistantships may be available
Immigration stress	May experience concerns about completion of licensure requirements during OPT. Given the more limited scope of practice, graduates may experience fewer opportunities for work visa sponsorship	May experience concerns about completion of licensure requirements during OPT. Given the broader scope of practice, graduates may experience more opportunities for work visa sponsorship
Barriers for international students	Language, acculturation, employment, educational, financial, social, and immigration related barriers	Language, acculturation, employment, educational, financial, social, and immigration related barriers

Note. OPT refers to Optional Practical Training.

Table 2*Demographic Characteristics of Sample*

International Student	Nationality	Age	Years in the United States	Gender
Gustavo	Brazil	28	4	Male
Karen	China	30	4	Female
Kavita	India	30	4	Female
Jessica	Singapore	24	6	Female
Rupa	India	48	2	Female
Elena	Chile	29	3	Female
Daniel	Nigeria	59	5	Male
Kim	South Korea	36	12	Female
Laura	Philippines	24	1	Female
Melissa	Sweden	25	5	Female
Jimmy	China	24	7	Male
Jenny	China	25	6	Female

Note. All names are pseudonyms.

Table 3*Focus Areas, Themes, and Codes*

Focus Areas	Themes	Codes	Proof Quotes
International journey with multiple barriers	Interpersonal stress	Alienation and feeling ‘othered’	I just feel like since I’m the only immigrant, I also happen to be the only person of color, I have to carry the weight of all people of color on my shoulders whenever we talk about cultural considerations and cultural humility. I feel like I have to educate everyone else about my cultural background. (Jessica)
		Acculturation concerns	
		Limited social interaction	
		Low international student representation	
		Leaving family and friends	
		Disconnection and loneliness	
	Language barriers	Academic and adjustment difficulties	I don't have too much of exposure to the culture here. It's not difficult for me to understand what people are going through, but to know how welcoming people will be of me, because I come from an entirely different culture and language. (Rupa)
		Clinical training concerns	
		Second-language anxiety	
		Lower self-confidence	
		Sociocultural differences	
	Financial pressures	Limited financial aid	When I started the program, I asked for my advisers if there was any on-campus job I could do because most of those are for U.S. citizens. I asked everyone I can ask for. Later I just gave up finding a job at that time. (Jenny)
		Employment restrictions	
		Reliance on others for financial support	
		Practicum with compensation	
	Advising concerns	Disconnection between counseling psychology faculty and International Student Office	The department’s orientation was more like how do you get your subjects... but nothing per se for international students. Then in the international student orientation, they talked about, what is the U.S. culture, what is the political climate? I was the only one in that room from the counseling psych department. (Kavita)
	Visa and immigration-related stress	CPT and OPT concerns	The recent government is not really international student-friendly. It’s not. Even the way they interpret even the F-1 visa right now is different what the other government, how they interpreted it. (Daniel)
		Licensure concerns	
		Desire for sponsorship	
		Scarcity and restricted H-1B	
		Uncertainty and unexpected policy changes	
		Transferability outside U.S.	

Agents of change in the midst of barriers	Self-Regulating	Self-care strategies	I use my art work as a self-therapy for me. (Elena)
	Stepping into discomfort	Push beyond comfort zone	I love adventure, trying out new things...new places to see and to experience. (Melissa)
	Cognitive reappraising	New perspectives of looking at barriers	This is all about building muscle strength to really go forward and really not being there like putting yourself in a fear zone. (Gustavo)
	Becoming a change agent	Brainstorming Strategizing Problem resolution	I have a friend who said that she was offered H-1B visa after undergrad, working with kids with autism, so I'm thinking now, if I want to get trained in the States, should I consider specializing in children? Because the demand is higher. Because they tend to compensate more. (Laura)
Social support-seeking	Meaningful personal relationships Validating and reassuring communication Foreign-born and compassionate faculty Other international students	My therapist is the one I can rely on emotionally...She's second generation Chinese-American and looks like me, yellow. She understands some collectivist culture. At the same time, she grew up in a western culture. I can relate her a lot. Also, she can understand me much better than other American therapists do. (Kim)	

Note. OPT refers to Optional Practical Training and CPT refers to Curricular Practical Training.

Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. As an international student pursuing a career in counseling psychology in the U.S., what would you say are the major stressors or career barriers [if any] that you have encountered? Please consider the application process, your academic journey, and future career opportunities.
2. As an international student, what would you say are the most significant challenges in terms of career selection?
3. How do you think that current stressors or challenges in the U.S. or in your country of origin shaped or influenced your career-making decisions?
4. How confident or capable do you feel about your ability to navigate and overcome these stressors and barriers?
5. What is your desired vision of the future, in terms of where you want your career to go after graduation? (Follow-up question) How motivated or determined do you feel to reach that desired vision?
6. What are some steps that you have taken in order to manage career stress or barriers related to being here on an international student visa?
7. What is your plan of action if/when a certain career option is unavailable to you or when you receive unfavorable news related to your career?
8. Who do you rely on during your academic journey? And, what are some of the activities you engage-in to stay connected to your support network?
9. What do you think about the quality of support that you have received as an international student from your counseling psychology program?
10. How do you feel about the mentorship that is available to you in your counseling psychology program in relation to your status as an international student?
11. As an international student, how well do you think your counseling psychology program has prepared or trained you to face career decisions and manage career challenges?
12. How much support have you received from your domestic student peers related to the unique challenges of being an international student in the U.S.?
13. How has your support system (e.g., family, friends, significant others) influenced your experiences as an international student and your career-making decisions?
14. Given your status as an international student, how are career opportunities in the field of counseling psychology different for you when compared to your domestic peers?