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Coping Strategies Among Disciplined Psychologists Working High-Conflict Custody Cases

Stephanie Joy Norris
Walden University

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Walden University

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Stephanie Norris

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2021

Abstract

Coping Strategies Among Disciplined Psychologists

Working High-Conflict Custody Cases

by

Stephanie Norris

MS, Walden University, 2019

MA, University of Denver, 2014

BS, University of Minnesota, 2000

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Clinical Psychology – Forensic Psychology

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Abstract

Psychologists who work with high conflict custody cases have one of the highest risks of receiving a board complaint against their license. There is no qualitative research specific to psychologists who have been disciplined from their state licensing board because of their work with high conflict custody cases. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and understand the meaning of the experiences of psychologists who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and have received discipline from their state licensing board. The transactional theory of stress and coping was used as the foundation for which the research questions were created. The research questions focused on how psychologists, who received disciplinary action, described their coping strategies and changes within their professional practice. There were six participants who completed a semistructured, in-depth interview. Data analysis consisted of multiple readings, note taking, and the identification of emergent and clustered themes. The results of the study identified five themes and 12 subthemes. The findings revealed that psychologists significantly struggled emotionally, financially, and mentally and refused to work with high conflict custody cases. Moreover, the findings revealed discrepancies with state licensing board's processes and decision-making about the board complaint. This study revealed significant changes for psychologists both professionally and personally due to their work with high conflict custody cases. This research indicated positive social change implications that include using the results to help psychologists navigate and understand potential issues and risks especially in their work with high conflict custody cases.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my beloved grandfather, Joel Bjorge who passed away before I finished my undergraduate degree. My grandfather worked and pushed me tirelessly to pursue my doctoral degree. Without his enormous support and unconditional love, I would have never become the person I am today.

I had promised to make my grandfather proud by the achievement of this monumental academic goal and I hope that I have fulfilled that promise. I wish that he could still be alive today to share with me the celebration and the success of my graduation with a Doctor of Philosophy degree.

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Moreover, I would like to thank my children, Lily, Sam, and Isabelle. I aspire to be like each of them and hope that I have set an example that nothing is impossible. Their unconditional love and belief in my ability to complete my dissertation gave me the conviction to not give up. Without their tremendous understanding, patience, and encouragement throughout my doctoral journey, it would have been impossible for me to complete my dissertation. Lastly, I would like to thank my adoptive parents, Alice and Tom. Their unconditional love not only supported me through my doctoral journey, but much more. I am eternally grateful to be surrounded by my children and adoptive parents.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Psychologists are licensed and governed by state licensing boards designed to protect the public. A board complaint can be filed against their license if a client believes the psychologist has committed misconduct or as a means for a client to validate their feelings (Bucky & Callan, 2014). As of January 1, 2020, there were 6,664 board complaints filed against psychologists collected from 50 psychology boards in the United States (Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards [ASPPB], 2019). Since the inception of state licensing boards governing the practice of psychologists, research has focused on the number and categories of complaints filed against all psychologists (Wilkinson et al., 2019). As research has continued to develop, the focus has shifted to discipline received and specialties of psychologists, such as those who work with high conflict custody cases (Saini et al., 2012). Today, there has been an increased demand for psychologists to work on high conflict custody cases, as well as an increase in board complaints being filed against their license (Francis et al., 2018).

In the current body of literature, there is very little research on the coping strategies and changes in a psychologist's professional practice due to discipline received from board complaints. Psychologists are expected to practice ethically and engage in continuing education and research (Horn et al., 2019). However, exposure to high conflict custody cases brings worry and fear of having a board complaint filed against their license despite the increased demand for psychologists to work with high conflict custody cases (Bow & Martindale, 2009; Wilkinson et al., 2019). There are clear gaps in the

research that identify the coping strategies and changes in professional practices of psychologists who have been disciplined and work with high conflict custody cases (Saini et al., 2012; Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Background

Psychologists who work on high conflict custody cases spend a considerable amount of time worrying about a board complaint being filed against their license (Bow & Martindale, 2009). Moreover, research suggests that psychologists did not receive any formal training in working with high conflict custody cases, rather they taught themselves (Bow & Martindale, 2009). Francis et al. (2018) found that many psychologists were not professionally competent to work with high-conflict custody cases, but primarily did.

A board complaint can be filed against their license for a variety of reasons (Bucky & Callan, 2014). The categories of board complaints filed against psychologists because of a custody case range from bias to issues with billing/collection, with the primary factors of a parent's decision to file ranging from anger at the psychologist to the feeling of being unfairly treated (Bow et al., 2010; Bucky & Callan, 2014). In general, a complaint against a psychologist's license can adversely affect their career and distress level (Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Psychologists who work with high-conflict custody cases, experience considerable distress when receiving and defending a board complaint that is filed (Bow et al., 2010; Bricklin et al., 2003; Bucky & Callan, 2014; Thomas, 2005; Van Horne, 2004; Wilkinson et al., 2019). They experience anxiety, depression, mistrust, sleep issues, and anger (Bow et al., 2010; Bricklin et al., 2003; Bucky & Callan, 2014; Thomas, 2005;

Van Horne, 2004; Wilkinson et al., 2019). Coy et al. (2016) found psychologists think their state licensing boards are irrelevant, expensive, and unhelpful as it relates to complaints being filed against their license. The feelings resulting from receiving a board complaint does impact their professional performance as well (Van Horne, 2004). In order to manage the higher risk of a board complaint, because of working with high-conflict custody cases, a psychologist must have coping strategies to deal with the higher risk, the board complaint, and discipline process.

Over the course of this chapter, I will explore the problem of psychologists receiving discipline from their state licensing board due to working on high conflict custody cases. Additionally, there is a discussion of the current research regarding the study, the design of the study, and some of the assumptions and limitations related to this design.

Problem Statement

Psychologists are licensed and governed by state licensing boards designed to protect the public. The number of board complaints filed against psychologists has increased yearly (ASPPB, 2019). The rate of board complaints to a state licensing board overall with custody cases ranges from 35–63% (Bow et al., 2010; Bow & Martindale, 2009; Wilkinson et al., 2019). Psychologists who work with high-conflict custody cases experience considerable distress and feelings resulting from receiving a board complaint because it could impact their professional performance (Bow et al., 2010; Bricklin et al., 2003; Bucky & Callan, 2014; Thomas, 2005; Van Horne, 2004; Wilkinson et al., 2019). In order to manage the higher risk of a board complaint, because of working with high-

conflict custody cases, a psychologist must have coping strategies to deal with the higher risk, the board complaint, and discipline process.

Research into board complaints involving custody evaluations has typically been defined by the number of complaints filed (Bow et al., 2010; Bow & Martindale, 2009; Bow & Quinnel, 2001; Kirkland & Kirkland, 2001; Wilkinson et al., 2019), psychological distress experienced by the psychologist during the process (Bow et al., 2010; Bricklin et al., 2003; Bucky & Callan, 2014; Thomas, 2005; Wilkinson et al., 2019), categories of complaints (Bow et al., 2010; Bow & Martindale, 2009; Bow & Quinnel, 2001; Kirkland & Kirkland, 2001; Wilkinson et al., 2019), and the reasons parents file complaints (Bucky & Callan, 2014). However, the gap in the literature is that there is little known about how psychologists cope with the outcome of disciplinary action by a state licensing board and the impact on their professional performance. In this study, I made an original contribution to the existing literature by describing psychologists' strategies used to cope and if the disciplinary action changed their professional performance with high-conflict custody cases with the outcome of disciplinary action by a state licensing board.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and understand the meaning of the experiences of psychologists who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and have received discipline from their state licensing board. Psychologists described their coping strategies to receiving the disciplinary action and if it changed their professional practice.

Research Questions

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do psychologists, who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and who received disciplinary action, describe the coping strategies they used?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do psychologists, who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and who received disciplinary action describe how it influenced change in their professional practice?

Conceptual Framework for the Study

Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping

The conceptual framework of this study was the transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The transactional theory of stress and coping is used to explain the cognitive processes and coping strategies that contribute to the outcome's psychologists used to deal with a board complaint (Biggs et al., 2017).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) asserted that individuals go through an appraisal process after a stressor, which generates feelings; however, if these feelings are negative, one will create coping strategies to deal with the stressors (Biggs et al., 2017). Stress is defined as something that is "harmful, threatening, or challenging, that exceeds the individual's capacity to cope" (Biggs et al., 2017, p. 352). Further, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) asserted these coping strategies created an outcome for the individual, which then is appraised again, and an outcome is determined as either negative or positive for the individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lastly, they asserted that if the outcome is favorable, positive emotions will ensue. However, if the outcome is negative, this then

creates more coping strategies to be utilized in hopes to resolve the stressor (Biggs et al., 2017). The transactional theory of stress and coping is used to explain the cognitive and emotional responses that led to a psychologist's coping strategies and changes in their professional practice in dealing with disciplinary action from their state licensing board.

Nature of the Study

I focused on exploring and understanding the coping strategies and changes in professional practice of psychologists, who work with high-conflict custody cases, used in dealing with discipline from their state licensing board. I used qualitative research to explore and understand this issue in a particular field of study. The primary focus of this dissertation was to better understand the coping strategies psychologists used and if their professional practice changed due to receiving discipline from their state licensing board. I used the research questions to explore psychologist's coping strategies and changes in their professional practices regarding coping with the discipline they received because of working with high-conflict custody cases. Through the research questions above, I was able to better understand the coping strategies and changes in professional practice due to receiving discipline from state licensing boards.

This study was a qualitative study because there is insufficient qualitative research on psychologists who work with high-conflict custody cases and the outcome of discipline they received from their state licensing boards. I explored the coping strategies and changes in professional practices psychologists used to cope with their discipline.

I collected data from psychologists who are currently or have previously worked with high conflict custody cases. I collected data from video interviews with participants.

These interviews consisted of nine open-ended questions with the intent for participants to freely talk about their experiences and coping strategies (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I accessed the data from the 50 state licensing boards in the United States, which published all psychologists who were disciplined due to a board complaint. Each state board maintains a roster of psychologists who have had a board complaint filed against their license, including any disciplinary action taken, and demographic information of each psychologist listed. Email addresses or phone numbers are provided.

I collected data from interviews with psychologists. I sent an email to each psychologist to notify them of the study with instructions to email the researcher if interested in participating (see Appendix A). I sent a reminder email 1 week after the first email (see Appendix D). A final email was sent 2 weeks later. The data collected was de-identified. There was no compensation given to participants. This information provided a deeper understanding of the experience of psychologists who work with high conflict custody cases.

Definitions

Board Complaint: The term board complaint refers to a client who “may misunderstand professional nomenclature or misinterpret technical information and, as a result, inaccurately perceive certain professional decisions and behaviors as ethical violations” (Thomas, 2005, p. 427).

Coping Strategies: The term coping strategies includes a psychologist’s distress, emotional challenges, experiencing significant stress, and the discipline having an

emotional impact that can include “terror, outrage, shock, disbelief, guilt, anger, and embarrassment” (Thomas, 2005, p. 427).

Discipline: Discipline refers to the state licensing board having a “preponderance of evidence” or “clear and convincing” standards in making a decision to take action against a psychologist/therapist for a violation of an ethical or legal issue (VanHorne, 2004, p. 171).

High Conflict Custody Cases: There is a distinction from high conflict to low conflict custody cases in that high conflict refers to high levels of “preoccupation and hostility between the parents, repeated malicious allegations to authorities about the other parent, high rates of litigation, lower rates of child support compliance, and an overall decreased capacity to parent” (Saini et al., 2012, p. 1309).

Professional Practice: Professional practice refers to a psychologist’s practice which includes working with insurance panels, professional associations, referrals, finances, and clients (Thomas, 2005).

State Licensing Boards: State licensing boards specifically refers to the monitoring of legal and ethical practices of counseling who serve to regulate the practices of licensed therapists and psychologists and act upon client’s ethical complaints (Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

My first assumption was that psychologists have experienced emotional difficulties and did not cope well with the discipline received. It is possible and likely that

psychologists engaged in avoiding with working on high conflict custody cases in their future practice. I also assumed that psychologists do not use the same coping strategies as other psychologists working on high conflict custody cases.

I assumed that psychologists did not receive the same level of training in working with high conflict custody cases. I assumed this due to the absence of guidance in decision making of the high conflict in custody cases, wherein psychologists do not know how to handle high conflict cases (Saini et al., 2012). Additionally, there are not consistent requirements across all states for continuing education requirements for psychologists working on high conflict custody cases (Neukrug et al., 2001).

I assumed that the participants would be open and truthful in their coping strategies and changes in professional practice due to the discipline they received. The study focus of discipline may have been emotionally triggering for the psychologist, and as a result, details may have been intentionally or unintentionally omitted during the interviews. This assumption may be directly influenced by the high-risk area that high conflict custody cases fall within (see Thomas, 2005).

Limitations

There were several limitations, challenges, and barriers to this study. The primary limitation was access to participants. Psychologists may not have wanted to participate in the study due to being psychologically triggered from their disciplinary experience. Moreover, according to the research, there is a small percentage of psychologists who actually receive disciplinary action; this narrowed my access to psychologists who have or work with high-conflict custody cases.

Another limitation was that the participants may be biased and filtered through their own views, which means they may have altered their experiences. Another limitation was my own potential bias because I have had two board complaints filed against me because of high-conflict custody cases and one that resulted in discipline. I worked hard to mitigate any influence of this potential bias in the data analysis, discussion, and overall dissertation process.

Scope and Delimitations

In this study, I explored the coping strategies and changes in professional practice of psychologists who have been disciplined by their state licensing board due to working on high conflict custody cases. I gathered the data for this study through semistructured, in-depth interviews from psychologists who have experience working on high conflict custody cases. Within the realm of board complaints against psychologists, professional practice changes have not been addressed (Wilkinson et al., 2019). Moreover, there is not currently enough information to interpret the impact of a board complaint and the lack of continuing education requirements that psychologists need in order to work with high conflict custody cases (Horn et al., 2019).

Regarding boundaries, I focused solely on psychologists and not master's level therapists/counselors. There are more master's level clinicians than psychologists per the state licensing boards, which eliminates a larger participant pool. I used purposive and snowball sampling, which I will discuss further in Chapter 3.

A specific delimitation was the credentials of the psychologists. Psychologists who are licensed and work or have worked with high conflict custody cases were the only

participants included. This limited many other practicing psychologists who have received disciplinary action against their state licensing board for a variety of reasons. However, future research may include all psychologists who have received disciplinary action for comparative studies.

Significance

This study may benefit other psychologists to become aware of the risks, decision making process, and outcome of psychologists who work with high-conflict custody cases. This study may benefit licensing boards and legislation in learning how psychologist's cope with disciplinary action and how it impacts their professional practice. Lastly, this study may be used to create mandatory trainings for psychologists who choose to work with this population to complete prior to taking on cases. With a large body of research showing that psychologists who work with high-conflict custody cases have a significantly higher likelihood of receiving a board complaint (Bow et al., 2010; Bucky & Callan, 2014; Mascari & Weber, 2013; Wilkinson et al., 2019), there was a deficit in understanding the coping strategies and changes in professional practice by psychologists.

Specific to psychologists who have been disciplined due to working on high conflict custody cases, a better understanding of how they cope and practice after the discipline could inform the field in various ways. Specifically, understanding the coping strategies and professional practice changes could have implications for legislation changes in removing discipline from a psychologist's license after an extended period of time specific to high conflict custody cases. Moreover, creating a specific continuing

education program would help to reduce the action taken from a state licensing board, thus reducing the discipline received (Horn et al., 2019). Understanding the coping strategies and changes in professional practice could lead to better professional practices in working with high conflict custody cases.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the coping strategies and changes in professional practices of psychologists who have been disciplined by their state licensing board and who have experience with high conflict custody cases. Understanding the board complaint and discipline received is evident in the literature outlined here; however, there is not much regarding the coping strategies and changes in professional practice after the discipline was received. In this qualitative study, I used Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping to create a framework to explore these specific phenomena.

Chapter 2 includes the literature review for this study, which highlights the theoretical framework for the study, literature on basic qualitative research and data collection, a synthesis of the current literature, and a discussion of the current gaps in psychologists who have been disciplined due to working on high-conflict custody cases. Chapter 3 includes a discussion regarding the design of the study, including the sampling strategy, interview questions, and data collection methods.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The current problem surrounding psychologists who are disciplined by their licensing board due to working on high-conflict custody cases is a unique area that is currently unexplored. Psychologists are licensed and governed by state licensing boards designed to protect the public. The number of board complaints filed against psychologists has increased yearly (ASPPB, 2019). The rate of board complaints to a state licensing board overall with custody cases ranges from 35–63% (Bow et al., 2010; Bow & Martindale, 2009; Wilkinson et al., 2019), which has caused psychologists who work with high-conflict custody cases, considerable distress, feelings of anxiousness, fear, worry, and sleep issues (Bow et al., 2010; Bricklin et al., 2003; Bucky & Callan, 2014; Thomas, 2005; Van Horne, 2004; Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Research into board complaints involving custody evaluations has typically been defined by the number of complaints filed (Bow et al., 2010; Bow & Martindale, 2009; Bow & Quinnel, 2001; Kirkland & Kirkland, 2001; Wilkinson et al., 2019), psychological distress experienced by the psychologist during the process (Bow et al., 2010; Bricklin et al., 2003; Bucky & Callan, 2014; Thomas, 2005; Wilkinson et al., 2019), categories of complaints (Bow et al., 2010; Bow & Martindale, 2009; Bow & Quinnel, 2001; Kirkland & Kirkland, 2001; Wilkinson et al., 2019), and the reasons parents file complaints (Bucky & Callan, 2014). However, the gap in the literature was that there is little known about how psychologists cope with the outcome of disciplinary

action by a state licensing board and the changes that occurred to their professional practice.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and understand the meaning of the experiences of psychologists who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and have received discipline from their state licensing board. The lived experiences of psychologists who have been disciplined has been discussed informally, but formal research in this area is significantly lacking (Horn et al., 2019; Williams, 2001).

The overall body of literature referring to board complaints against a psychologist's license indicated that psychologists who work with high conflict custody cases are at a high risk of receiving a board complaint, and as a result psychologists fear or are deterred from working with high conflict custody cases (Bow et al., 2010). However, a review of the literature highlights the current problem of unidentified coping strategies and changes in a psychologist's professional practice after they received the discipline due to working on high conflict custody cases.

The conceptual framework of this study was the transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The transactional theory of stress and coping is used to explain the cognitive processes and coping strategies that contributed to the outcome's psychologists used to deal with discipline received from a board complaint (Biggs et al., 2017).

In the following chapter, I review the current body of literature related to the transactional theory of stress and coping as well as psychologists, families in conflict,

high conflict custody cases, board complaints, and coping strategies and changes in their professional practice. Moreover, I will discuss this in greater length, including (a) literature search strategy, (b) conceptual framework, (c) literature review related to key variables, and (d) summary of findings.

Literature Search Strategy

I searched for online through several databases within the Walden University library. These databases include PsychINFO, PsychARTICLES, and PsychEXTRA. Additionally, I used the EBSCO data base to find general articles as well as articles with general psychologists and psychologists who work with high conflict custody cases specifically in their practice. I also searched for transactional theory of stress and coping journal articles were searched for through the above-mentioned data bases, however, few articles were found through these data bases. I also included journal articles from ProQuest searches available through SAGE journals. I used the EBSCO data base search as well as the online availability of the following publications *Leisure Sciences*, *The Handbook of Stress and Health: A Guide to Research and Practice*, and *Journal of Sports Medicine*.

Along with online searches, access to several hardcopy journals yielded relevant results. I used articles within the following publications: *Journal of Forensic Psychology Practice*, *Journal of Child Custody*, *Professional Practice: Research and Practice*, *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, and *Journal of Applied Psychology*. These studies did not include any year-based limitations.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was the transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus and Folkman (1987) began studying stress and coping in the 1970s, which led to their metatheory and main theoretical constructs. They identified a system of appraisal, which consists of variables that interact with a person's appraisal process and stressors. Moreover, Lazarus and Folkman (1987) asserted that stress was impacted by a person's emotions, cognitive processes, and stressors within their environment. Lastly, they focused on many emotions, such as anger, fear, guilt, and shame.

Lazarus and Folkman (1987) asserted that this system is best explained by transactions that occur through a person's stressors, the appraisal of those stressors, and feelings which results in a person's coping patterns. Moreover, Lazarus (2003) asserted that there is a relational meaning centered view of emotions. A person puts their emotions into categories; however, there are many emotions in one category (Lazarus, 2003). These emotions lead a person to lose information in the process of evaluating the stressor and then choose the emotions most prevalent (Lazarus, 2003). However, through this process a person's emotions are often hidden, which distorts their outcome due to the relationship between their appraisal of their stressors coupled with their emotions (Lazarus, 2003).

Lazarus and Folkman (1987) asserted that a relationship existed between a person's appraisal of their stressors and their feelings. They explained a person and their environment is a relationship that results in a transaction of how they appraise their

current stressors in their environment in relation to their emotional state. If a person perceives a threat in their environment but does not react or engage with the feeling of threat, then no transaction or relationship exists (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). However, if a person reacts to the threat or engages in the environmental stimuli, then a transaction has happened which results in a coping strategy (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Lazarus and DeLongis (1983) identified that a person could reach out to their support system, suppress their emotions, or avoid emotions which leads to somatic issues.

Moreover, Lazarus and Folkman (1987) asserted the environmental stimuli evoke an emotional response in a person. They claimed that emotions cannot be defined only by an environmental stimulus, they are part of a system. Emotions are also defined by the response to the stimuli, the internal conflict that may occur, and the quality and intensity of the emotion, which is dependent on the variables at play (Lazarus and Folkman, 1987). They identified the following main variables within the system: environmental antecedents (demands, constraints and resources, ambiguity, and imminence), person antecedents (goal hierarchies and belief systems), mediating processes (appraisal and coping), short-run outcomes (emotions during and right after the encounter), and long-run adaptational outcomes (subjective well-being or morale, social functioning, and somatic health).

Not only are the emotional responses important to the theory of transactional theory of stress and appraisal, but Lazarus and Folkman (1987) also asserted the cognitive appraisal is an essential component. They asserted that humans constantly evaluate what is happening and apply it to themselves. Moreover, they differentiate

between information processing and appraisal. Lazarus and Folkman (1987) explained that information processing and appraisal are connected. They claimed that a person's information processing results in their appraisal of that information with self-reflection.

Lazarus and Folkman (1987) identified two kinds of appraisal: primary and secondary. They explained primary appraisal involves what is happening with a person and if it connects to them. There are three primary appraisals of stress: harm, threat, and challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Harm involves what has already been experienced by the person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Threat involves the anticipation of the harm (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Challenge involves the potential for mastery or a gain (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Overall, challenge and threat are often involved with one another because there is a risk of harm to the person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

This leads to the appraisal of whether a human relationship is harmful or beneficial to the person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). However, it depends on the social and cultural environmental conditions and the psychological components that the person brings to the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987), such as, a person's beliefs and how they think about the cognitive component. The motivational component is the person's goals and goal hierarchies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Overall, the primary appraisal involves a person's decision based on the stakes they have in the encounter (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Lazarus and Folkman (1987) defined a person's goal hierarchy as the antecedent trait, whereas the stakes are the transactional variable. They explained the stakes are formed from a person's goal and the interaction this has to their environment. Lastly, Lazarus and Folkman (1987) asserted secondary appraisal consists of how much

control a person has over the situation, which involves harm, threat, and challenge. A problem surfaced for the theorists because as they researched stress, they realized they were missing a significant part in the explanation of a person's response.

It was through Lazarus and Folkman's historical research where they discovered a change was needed in their approach from focusing on stress to coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Lazarus and Folkman (1987) identified coping as a significant factor in a person's well-being, their subjectiveness toward self, and their social functioning and health. They stated that the coping process includes escape and avoidance in situations. Moreover, Lazarus and Folkman (1987) identified when a person avoids and escapes, they lower their ability to react to stress and it reduces their motivation. It was from this research that Lazarus and Folkman created the Daily Hassles Scale and the Uplifts Scale which measures a person's stressors and their degree of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Lazarus and Folkman (1987) concluded that a person's coping style impacts their overall emotional well-being, because it changes how a person feels. Moreover, this change triggers a person's cognitive appraisal of these feelings (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

Biggs et al. (2017) explained that individuals go through an appraisal process after a stressor, which generates feelings; however, if these feelings are negative, individuals will create coping strategies to deal with the stressors. Stress is defined as something that is "harmful, threatening, or challenging, that exceeds the individual's capacity to cope" (Biggs et al., 2017, p. 352). Moreover, a person can have positive or negative stress in their life. As a result, both experiences may produce the same

psychological reaction for people because of their coping strategies (Lazarus, 1963). A reason for this is because a person's fear is associated with their biological survival as well as the potential threat (Lazarus, 1963).

This causes a person to appraise their situation more than once. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) asserted these coping strategies created an outcome for the individual, which then is appraised again, and the outcome is determined as either negative or positive for the individual. Lazarus and DeLongis (1983) identified that a person's coping strategies have an impact on their cognitive appraisal. They stated that a person uses the same coping strategies and if those do not work, they change the meaning of the stressful situation.

This change typically leads to positive emotions. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) claimed that if the outcome is favorable, positive emotions will ensue. Positive emotions involve a person's subjective positive feelings and a favorable life outcome (Lazarus, 2003). Positive emotions include hope, joy, happiness, pride, and love (Lazarus, 2003). Conversely, negative emotions involve a person's subjective bad feelings, basing the outcome on an unfavorable outcome and negative consequences (Lazarus, 2003). Negative emotions include anger, threat, pride, and anxiety (Lazarus, 2003). However, if the outcome is negative, this then creates more coping strategies to be utilized in hopes to resolve the stressor (Biggs et al., 2017).

Moreover, a person's coping may also be impacted by their mental health. Lazarus and Folkman (1987) asserted that individuals who are diagnosed with depression have a more negative lens of coping with their appraisal process. Individuals with

depression take a more hostile approach, viewing a stressor with anger, self-blame, criticism, and avoidance (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). As a result, this response can contribute to a decrease in their overall ability to manage their daily living skills and mental health (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). This study emphasized an important note that each person's coping, whether negative or positive, is individualized and dependent on many factors.

Lazarus (1999) asserted that a person's coping and appraisal process is very individualized. He studied cross-sectional research of people 65, 75, and 85 years old and searched for an explanation of differences in their stress, emotion, and coping according to their age cohorts. Additionally, he identified the following stressors impact individuals who are older: losses in social, psychological, and health related issues. Lazarus (1999) found that the differences in the impact of the stressors and their chosen coping strategies varied individually.

Overall, there are many variables that influence a person's appraisal process of their stressors. Moreover, this system of variables influences the outcome of a person's situation based on their emotional response to an environmental stimulus. Furthermore, a person's stressful stimulus impacts each of the components of the system and within the system are transactions that influence each of the system parts. As a result, there are many emotions that can be felt by an individual, which also influences the outcome.

A person experiences both positive and negative emotions, which is influenced by their cognitive appraisal process as well as their previous experiences (Lazarus (1999)). Moreover, the person's appraisal process has been shaped by their previous stressors as

well as the coping strategies they used. Therefore, a person who experiences a current stressor or the potential threat of a stressor will respond according to their existing coping strategies as well as their negative and positive emotions.

In this study, I used the transactional theory of stress and coping to explain the cognitive appraisal and emotional responses that led to a psychologist's coping strategies and changes in professional practice because they received disciplinary action from their state licensing board. Specifically, I explored the cognitive appraisal processes of psychologists and the outcome of the discipline they received. I also explored their previous experiences with board complaints and whether it had an impact on their overall coping strategies. Furthermore, identifying the negative and positive emotions used to cope and influence changes in their professional practice related to receiving a board complaint and subsequent discipline. Overall, I explored each of the variables within the transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) in this study in regard to psychologists who received disciplinary action due to working with high-conflict custody cases.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables

In order to provide a complete picture of the study in the context, it is critical to understand the practice in which the research was conducted. While the previous section included research pertaining specifically to the transactional theory of stress and coping, the following sections will focus on the implications of psychologists who received board complaints and subsequent discipline within high conflict custody cases. There is some additional discussion and research regarding psychologist's coping strategies and changes

in their professional practices. This addition will serve to highlight some core deficits of the implications of board complaints and subsequent discipline from state licensing boards with high conflict custody cases within the field of psychology.

Psychologists

Licensed Psychologists

A licensed psychologist must hold a doctoral degree, complete a practicum and internship within their doctoral program, pass a national exam, and complete a post-doctorate for one year in most states (Wilkinson et al., 2019). Psychologists are also registered with their state licensing board through the state in which they practice and reside (Horn et al., 2019). Moreover, abiding by the state administration that mandates and regulates the licenses of mental health practitioners is required (Krom, 2019). One regulation for mental health providers is continuing education, which must be completed in order for a psychologist to renew the good standing of their licensure (Horn et al., 2019; Krom, 2019). A key component to the ethical practice of psychologists is the mandated requirement of annual continuing education credits because this serves as an integral part of continued training and development (Horn et al., 2019). A psychologist's responsibility is to complete all continuing education training requirements, which can include peer consultation groups, self-directed learning, conferences, and courses specific to topics and specialties of all psychologists (Horn et al., 2019).

A licensed psychologist can practice in therapy, assessments, supervision, leadership, and in many different settings. As a result, many specialty areas within psychology have developed their own set of standards coupled with the overarching

ethical and legal standards within the mental health field. This includes training specifically in evidenced based training programs in graduate school (Warren & Park, 2018). Warren and Park (2018) identified that monitoring, self-care, and emerging methods are pivotal in graduate training programs which closely aligns with the ethical guidelines of psychologists. Overall, state licensing boards have many components of a psychologist's practice to mandate and regulate because ethical and legal practices are vital to reduce the risk of harm to clients.

Ultimately, the goal of state licensing boards is to ensure psychologists are competent, trained for their specific specialty, stay within their scope of practice, and practice within their ethical and legal standards (Horn et al., 2019). The American Psychological Association [APA] (2010) ethical guidelines provide standards and best practices for psychologists, such as specific guidelines to ensure psychologists practice within their scope. A psychologist needs to know their role, responsibilities, the identified client, and how to become competent to work with a specialized population. Overall, psychologists are governed by their state licensing boards, which hold high legal standards (statutes) of ethical practices of all mental health practitioners in order to provide the most ethical, legal, and fair treatment to the clients they serve.

Overall, psychologists follow specific requirements to become a licensed mental health practitioner within the state they reside. Many psychologists specialize in a particular area and need to know their role, responsibilities, and identified client especially when working with marriage, children, divorce, and custody cases. These requirements are mandated and regulated by their state licensing board as well as the

APA ethical guidelines. Moreover, the goal of state licensing boards as well as training programs is to ensure psychologists are practicing competently within their scope of practice. Psychologist's scope of practice can include many areas; however, in this study I focused on divorce and custody. It is important to understand the literature on marriage, children, divorce, and custody as it helps to lay the foundation of why this study is important.

Psychologist's Scope of Practice in Marriage, Children, Divorce, and Custody

Mokhtari et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis and studied the trends in marriage, birth, and divorce from the 1920's to the 1980's. They found that the rate of marriages is being postponed, specifically, individuals are getting married later and beginning families later in life. Miscellany (2019) defined a long-term marriage as a couple being married at least 10 years. However, he asserted that many statutes include cohabitation as well as the length of their married life. Mokhtari et al. (2020) also identified a 10% increase in the divorce rate overall. They noted the traditional family system of a mom, dad, and children is no longer common. They identified a decline in the traditional family system. However, Mokhtari et al. (2020) explained family systems vary and now can consist of two fathers, two mothers, blended families, single parents, and heterosexual couples.

McNelis and Segrin (2019) conducted a quantitative study with 413 adults. They attempted to explain that the risk of divorce is increased by a person's traits and development and included factors of personality and verbal aggression. They studied attachment styles and Gottman's (1994a, 2000) four horsemen related to dysfunctional

communication. They described the four horsemen as complain/criticize stage, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewall/withdrawal. McNelis and Segrin (2019) found that intimate communication creates a secure base in a relationship. They asserted that a person's attachment style predicts how adults' function in romantic relationships. They also explained that communication styles are learned socially and reenacted as an adult. This is an important factor that may contribute to the divorce rate as well as the conflict that can be created in custody disputes.

McNelis and Segrin (2019) identified that individuals that have insecure attachment exhibit a lack of disclosure, responsive interaction, causing dissatisfaction, conflict, and distress within their intimate relationships. These individuals often make demands and stonewall their partners. Moreover, McNelis and Segrin (2019) found anxious and avoidant attachment styles increase the odds of a divorce and criticism is a significant predictor in divorce. Additionally, Miscellany (2019) explained in divorce cases earnings are calculated based on what degree the spouse has. He cited the following example, if a spouse does not work but has an MBA degree, their wages are calculated according to their potential future income. Additionally, he identified this can have an impact on the custody outcomes, such as child support is based on the income of a parent and the number of days the child resides with each parent.

Ackerman and Ackerman (1997) conducted a quantitative study with 800 psychologists. They were interested in the child custody evaluation practices of psychologists who work with high-conflict custody cases. They found that joint custody was more commonly awarded than 10 years ago and is true today. Moreover, Ackerman

and Ackerman (1997) identified parent alienation and psychological stability were common reasons, in the past, when making a decision for sole custody. However, best interest factors of the children now serve as the primary decision for sole custody (Wilkinson et al., 2019). Another factor that psychologists look into in regard to sole custody is the anger that both parents feel toward each other (Ackerman & Ackerman, 1997). This can lead to difficult decisions for the court to identify where the children will be placed primarily and with whom. Additionally, this can also lead to difficulties with the psychologist's scope of practice with clients of divorce.

Psychologists have many areas to choose from to practice, however, their scope of practice in children and divorce is a risky population due to the likelihood of receiving a board complaint. Conversely, social workers who also work primarily with children and divorce are the least likely to receive a board complaint (Boland-Prom et al., 2015). Boland-Prom and Alvarez (2014) conducted a quantitative study of 20 social workers who received discipline from their state licensing board. They found child pornography possession or distribution was the most frequent reason for discipline followed by revocation of their license as a consequence. However, they concluded that social workers were the least likely to receive a board complaint or discipline. Conversely, marriage and family therapists (MFTs) who primarily work with families and families of divorce have limited research on board complaints filed and discipline received (Coy et al., 2016).

MFT's require a specific licensure with requirements to complete to maintain their license, similar to all other areas of mental health previously mentioned. However,

there was very little qualitative research conducted on this population within MFT's in regard to receiving a board complaint. Coy et al. (2016) cited themselves as the first. They conducted a qualitative study and examined the lived experiences of 10 MFT's who had received a board complaint for issues with billing, bias, and dual relationships. They found that MFT's experience significant anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, shame, and guilt. As a result, the majority of MFT's choose new careers in lieu of compliance with the licensing board's rehabilitative steps. Moreover, they found the majority of participants felt the board was more punitive and were not acting in the best interest of the public.

Interestingly, Coy et al. (2016) found that as a result of receiving discipline the participants had a need for financial and significant emotional support, personal therapy, and used their faith to guide them through the aftermath. Lastly, they found many of the participants left the field. This creates a problem since the trends in birth of children and divorce have increased. Additionally, since social workers are leaving the field and having detrimental consequences as a result of working with this population, then there would be an issue for psychologists' working with this group as well. Moreover, this creates an additional problem because there is a need for psychologists to work with high risk populations, such as high conflict custody cases.

Overall, this research supports an increase in divorce rates as well as the traditional family system shifting to a more diverse system of parents and children. Moreover, the research supports the complexities involved in decision making within the court system regarding custody. It is important to note that decisions regarding sole

custody involve parental alienation, anger, and a parent's psychological stability. For this reason, it is even more important to have psychologists who are specifically trained to work with parents of high-conflict custody issues.

High Conflict Custody Cases

High Conflict Custody and Forensic Psychologists

High conflict custody cases require a specialized area of practice for psychologists to become competent in order to provide the most ethical treatment for all parties involved (Bow et al., 2010). Moreover, because of the specialization Bow et al. (2010) urged state licensing boards to be specifically competent and specialized in the area of high-conflict custody cases because of the high risk of board complaints. One issue that remains in regard to high conflict custody cases is that there is not a universal standard in conducting an evaluation. However, Martindale and Gould (2004) created four essential components to a forensic model for the application of child custody evaluations. For example, they conceptualized a psychologist's role, purpose, and focus are defined by the courts. They also stated that a psychologist needs to understand their role within the courts. Martindale and Gould (2004) explained each state within the nation has best interest factors that govern the practices of psychologists, judges, and anyone who works with child custody cases. Similarly, the APA (2010) outlined guidelines for child custody evaluations for psychologists who work with custody cases as well as high conflict custody cases. Martindale and Gould's (2004) four essential components of child custody cases and the APA guidelines for child custody evaluations continue to be used today as the standard for what should be included in evaluations.

Martindale and Gould (2004) reported the client is the court, not the child or family. This is an important distinction because confusion can be created about the role and responsibility toward the client, which could increase the risk of board complaints. Further, Martindale and Gould (2004) stressed a psychologist needs to understand what psychological and legal issues they are asked to address within the case. They also conceptualized that a psychologist act in accordance with their legal and ethical standards and informed decisions are made based on the forensic psychology ethics code.

Overall, due to the complexity of high conflict custody cases, a higher likelihood of receiving a board complaint is likely. Therefore, Kirkland and Kirkland (2001) stated that psychologists who work with high-conflict custody cases should expect a board complaint against their license, which continues to be true today. And, if psychologists fear this, they should not work with this population.

In sum, based on this research, I conclude there is a need for specialized training with psychologists who work with high-conflict custody cases. Moreover, because of the complexity of these cases, a psychologist needs to know their role, responsibility, and scope of practice, which is vital in ensuring the most ethical and legal treatment. Lastly, there is a strong likelihood of a board complaint being filed against a psychologist's license due to the factors involved with parents within a high-conflict custody dispute.

Overall, not only is there a lack of research in the areas of high conflict custody cases and forensic psychologists, but current research is scarce. The APA (2010) asserted that the majority of parents agree in regard to custody of their children, in fact approximately 90% of parents fell within this category; however, the court is involved

with the remainder of cases. Saini et al. (2012) defined high conflict custody issues as parents who are stuck in a cycle of hostility with repeated malicious allegations, frequent litigations, and who have an overall decreased capacity to parent their children. They conducted a qualitative study of four focus groups of 28 child protection workers. Saini et al. (2012) found that 10-20% of high conflict parents fell within the definition of high conflict. Moreover, they asserted there are factors included in the definition of high conflict divorce. Saini et al. (2012) stated parents are highly manipulative, in a constant state of distress, struggled significantly with communication, have mental health diagnoses, and bring harm to their children. Bucky and Callan (2014) found another factor in the definition of high conflict divorce was a fear of losing custody of their children. Moreover, they explained parents have a sense of loss of control due to the high stress they experience. As a result, parents pursue high volumes of litigations as a means to release these feelings. The high volumes of litigation becomes a factor in understanding the complexities involved in high conflict custody cases.

Saini et al. (2012) called for a specialized team of professionals to help families who fell within the high conflict custody category. The area of specialty is known as forensic psychology due to issues related to the family system seeking specialized services to help them gain custody of their children within the legal system. However, due to the significant factors included in high conflict custody cases, it has been called one of the most stressful fields to work. Kirkland and Kirkland (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of 2,413 complaints against psychologists who worked with high-conflict custody cases. They were interested in the frequency of board complaints and

disciplinary action. They found that only 1% of psychologists received discipline and that high-conflict custody cases were the most stressful area to work in the field of psychology.

Specifically, parents in high-conflict custody cases often need someone to blame, such as the psychologist (Bucky & Callan, 2014). Bucky and Callan (2014) identified that parents often file a board complaint for the following reasons: bias in favor of another parent, lack of symmetry, timeliness of the report, breach of confidentiality, evaluation cost, multiple relationships, and failure to report child abuse. Bucky and Callan (2014) also explained that anger was a significant factor in parent's filing board complaints against psychologists. Further, Kirkland and Kirkland (2001) asserted high conflict custody cases is the second highest area for board complaints for psychologists. Bow et al. (2010) conducted a quantitative study of 117 psychologists who had received a board complaint because of their work with a high-conflict custody case. Sixty-three percent of psychologists in their study had received a board complaint. Based on Bow et al.'s (2010) findings, they explained that high-conflict custody cases have a high volume of conflict and hostility, which results in parents directing these feelings toward the psychologist.

Due to the high conflict nature and intensity of emotions from parents, psychologists' preferences have changed in regard to high conflict custody work. Ackerman and Ackerman (1997) found that almost 100% of psychologists prefer to be either court ordered or ordered by a guardian ad litem on high conflict custody cases. This is a significant change from 1986 when only 31% of psychologists preferred to be

court ordered (Ackerman & Ackerman, 1997). Ackerman and Ackerman (1997) identified an increase in the amount of time spent on custody cases from 18.8 hours to 21.1 hours. They also found 91% of psychologists preferred to see the parents separately and not together with their children. Lastly, Ackerman and Ackerman (1997) asserted that the cost of high conflict custody cases has tripled in the last 10 years. They found the average cost is \$2,645.96 per case. This is the result of time; for example, parents in high conflict custody cases require more time and attention from a psychologist due to the high litigation practices they exhibit.

High conflict custody resolutions typically result in more litigations with parents constantly battling over the same issues, such as parenting time, finances, and false accusations (Saini et al., 2012). Resolutions also result in harm to the children, who are often put in the middle of the high conflict between their parents (Saini et al., 2012). Parents are typically court ordered to therapy, which can be helpful; however, psychologists often feel pressured to take sides (Saini et al., 2012). Moreover, most psychologists do not know how to handle high conflict custody cases due to parents presenting in a constant state of crisis (Saini et al., 2012). Psychologists often feel stress and resentment (Saini et al., 2012), which can potentially impact the therapeutic interventions offered. As a result, it requires a very specialized area of practice and expertise.

Bow and Martindale (2009) claimed there is a high demand for psychologists to work on custody cases, which continues today. However, 22% received a board complaint from their work on custody cases (Bow & Martindale, 2009). Schoenfeld et al.

(2001) conducted a quantitative study, which resulted in studying two groups of psychologists, the nonviolation and violation group. They asserted the most common reaction of psychologists who have been disciplined was annoyance. However, they focused on the psychologist's opinion of their state licensing board process. Overall, Schoenfeld et al. (2001) found that psychologists were dissatisfied with the board's process specific to the conclusion stage. Specifically, 21% of the nonviolation group were not happy with the board's outcome; whereas, 66% of the violation group were not happy with the board's outcome (Schoenfeld et al., 2001). Moreover, they stated psychologists overwhelmingly believed their boards to be punitive, unfair, and abusive in how they dealt with the board complaint process. They explained their emotional reactions to their licensing board as primarily guilt and feeling like they were a criminal.

Overall, based on the research, I conclude that psychologist's experience high distress when working with high-conflict custody cases as well as the risk a psychologist takes in working with this population. Moreover, there are many components involved in the high litigation of parents and time commitment involved from a psychologist. The overarching issue is the need for psychologists to be trained specifically within this area of specialty in hopes to reduce the likelihood of a board complaint. However, it is clear that psychologists are shifting toward a more protective and preventative approach by requesting they be court ordered. Lastly, there are significant stressors and emotions involved with psychologists not only in working with high conflict custody cases but also receiving board complaints.

Board Complaints

Violations and Reactions of Filed Board Complaints

Thomas (2014) compiled data from the ASPPB from 2012 in regard to the five most common violations of psychologists. She asserted the five most common board complaints for psychologists were “unprofessional conduct, sexual misconduct, nonsexual dual relationships, negligence, and criminal convictions” (p. 1105). Martindale and Gould (2004) conceptualized the forensic model to help psychologists’ function as contactors and not helpers. They addressed the most common mistakes psychologists make and applied the model to the ethics of custody evaluations. Martindale and Gould (2004) claimed that discipline from board complaints is more common when a psychologist’s rules, roles, and responsibilities are unclear from the courts. They also asserted that multiple relationships are a frequent and large issue. Martindale and Gould (2004) stated psychologists are often hired and put into a multiple relationship, such as they are asked to do the custody evaluation as well as therapy for the clients. Neukrug et al. (2001) conducted a survey of 45 states within the United States and found a total of 2,325 board complaints were filed against psychologists, and 241 of those went under a formal investigation. They found that the number one complaint was dual relationships. Boland-Prom and Alvarez (2014) defined dual relationships as a psychologist who plays multiple roles in a relationship with a client, such as having a professional and personal relationship. The results of these studies are consistent with the quantitative data on the most common violations of board complaints for psychologists, and are consistent with a

need for a qualitative study to hear directly from the psychologists about their lived experiences through this process.

Additionally, Thomas (2005) conducted a literature review and focused on the impact on a psychologist's defense and clinical practice because of a board complaint filed against their license. She identified the following common reasons clients file a board complaint against a psychologist: abuse, neglect, and deprivation due to a client's history. Thomas (2005) further explained that these types of clients commonly experienced vulnerability and a misunderstanding of a psychologist's intent, which led to their retaliation. This retaliation leads to a myriad of emotional responses from psychologists.

Montgomery et al. (1999) created a survey to investigate the most common reactions to a board complaint from a psychologist. They found common feelings were shock, anguish, fear, depression, annoyance, worry, and anger. Schoenfeld et al. (2001) conducted a quantitative study of 240 licensed psychologists and master's level psychologists. They were interested in the psychologist's responses to a board complaint being filed against their license. Schoenfeld et al. (2001) found that psychologists who were disciplined experienced shock, depression, annoyance, anger, and worry. Additionally, Bow et al. (2010) conducted a quantitative study of 117 psychologists. They were interested in the reactions of psychologists who received a licensing board complaint because of working on high-conflict custody cases. Bow et al. (2010) found that psychologist's experience anger, anxiety, sleep disturbance, and depression. These studies are consistent with the quantitative research conducted on high-conflict custody

cases and the feelings that psychologists associate with receiving a board complaint against their license. There is a the need for a qualitative study focused on psychologist's coping strategies and changes in their professional practice after they received discipline from their state licensing board due to their work with high-conflict custody cases.

Overall, the most common violations psychologists make during their work with high-conflict custody cases appears to be replicated and consistent in the literature. The emotional reactions of psychologists who have received a board complaint also appears to be replicated and consistent. The clear gap in the literature is what happens after a psychologist receives discipline from their state licensing board. Additionally, there is a clear gap of literature on qualitative studies within the specialty area of high-conflict custody cases. Specifically, the gap found is the coping strategies after discipline has been received and a psychologist's changes in their professional practices.

Board Complaints and State Licensing Boards

It is important to highlight the research beginning in 1998 to 2019 in regard to board complaints within a psychologist's specialty area of high conflict custody cases and the emphasis on quantitative studies of statistical data. In 1998, Glassman found ethical violations of psychologists who work with child custody cases totaled 7-10% from 1990 to 1994. He asserted the majority of discipline included fines, continuing education, suspension and revocation of licenses as outcomes. In 1999, Montgomery et al. explained that only 1-2% of psychologists had a likelihood of being sued because of a client. They described many reasons for clients to sue their psychologist, such as misconduct, unethical treatment, confidentiality breaches, and child custody cases. Glassman (1998)

also claimed the majority of board complaints alleged bias and unprofessional conduct of the psychologist. In 2001, Williams explained that 6% of psychologists received discipline from a board complaint and 14% of them were threatened with a complaint. Schoenfeld et al. (2001) studied board complaints between 1983 to 2000 and found that 90% of psychologists were disciplined, with the top two reasons for discipline being sexual or multiple relationships. Additionally, they explained a very small number of psychologists were actually sued (.5-2%).

In 2001, Kirkland and Kirkland explained that 7-10% of psychologists who work with high conflict custody cases received a board complaint, however, only 1% of them were actually disciplined. Further, they found most board complaints were frivolous grievances from parents who were not happy with the outcome of their court case and needed someone to blame. Kirkland and Kirkland (2001) described the most common disciplinary actions taken when a psychologist was disciplined were continuing education and five years of probation. Bow et al. (2010) explained that 64% of psychologists had a board complaint filed against them due to working on high-conflict custody cases. They also claimed that 21% of parents had also filed a complaint against other parties, such as judges, attorneys, and evaluators. Moreover, Bow et al. (2010) found 21% of parents were diagnosed with a serious mental health disorder, such as a personality disorder. Moreover, Neukrug et al. (2001) found a significant increase (103%) in the number of complaints, in general, filed against psychologists comparing data compiled from 1987 to 1992 to more recent data. In 2004, Van Horne asserted that 72% of psychologists knew

someone who had a board complaint filed against them. And, 14% of those psychologists who knew someone had been threatened by a client to file a board complaint.

Horn et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of board complaints filed from 1995 to 2001, which is regulated by the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (ASPPB). They found a 2% increase each year and overall only 5-9% of board complaints received discipline. They asserted the most common complaints filed were as follows: multiple relationships, physical or mental impairment, lack of continuing education requirement, negligence, record keeping issues, billing issues, and general conduct and judgement decision issues. It is interesting they found one of the most common complaints filed was incomplete continuing education requirements. This is a concern due to professionals not complying with their state licensing boards and training program requirements.

Wilkinson et al. (2019) conducted a content analysis of the 50 states and Washington DC licensing boards. They were only interested in psychologists who received discipline from the board and the period of 2010 to 2014. They claimed there was a consistent annual increase dating back to 1987. Wilkinson et al. (2019) found the top two issues were dual relationships and payment inaccuracies. Moreover, Wilkinson et al. (2019) and Krom (2019) claimed that continuing education was the most common consequence from a psychologist's disciplinary action. All of these studies support the quantitative research that has been conducted on the statistical data of psychologists who received discipline from their state licensing boards from 1998 to 2019. Moreover, other research in regard to high conflict custody cases has focused on issues with competency

of psychologists who received a board complaint because of their work with this difficult population.

Horn et al. (2019) asserted there are issues with competent practices and psychologists. They found errors in a psychologist's own assessment of their competency levels, such as psychologists were likely to self-assess their skills and knowledge inaccurately. Horn et al. (2019) explained that psychologists rated themselves higher than they were. Shen-Miller et al. (2015) conducted a qualitative study with 12 APA student affiliate members and were interested in professional competency issues. Specifically, they wanted to know if action was taken against students when competency issues were discovered. They found that trainees within psychology programs had the following professional competency issues: substance abuse, ethical issues, deficient clinical skills, and multiple relationships. Further, Shen-Miller et al. (2015) explained that trainees were afraid to name problematic behaviors in other professionals due to fear of overstepping boundaries. It is clear that issues with competency began within the training programs of psychologists. The lack of competency is a concern because it may lead to unethical behaviors, which could result in a board complaint in their future. Moreover, with the connection of the high-risk population of custody cases there is a clear need for a specialized training program. If specialized training programs are created, it may increase the number of psychologists to work within this specialty area.

Coy et al. (2016) found that the state licensing boards for MFT took extreme measures and had a more punitive approach rather than rehabilitative. For example, they explained that state licensing boards make discipline public record with no time limit to

publication, which created public stigma, shame, isolation, and humiliation in therapists. They described that therapists believed the board accused the therapist of guilt until they were proven innocent, which rarely occurred within their study. Williams (2001) found more often than not that new issues were found within board complaints that were not related to the actual complaint filed by the client. In sum, one of the reasons for an unsuccessful result is often because state licensing boards look into every aspect of the psychologist's practice when a board complaint is received and often discipline psychologists for something different than the filed complaint (Williams, 2001).

Van Horne (2004) stated that all states have the same goal of serving and protecting the public, which continues today. She conducted a literature review focused on disciplinary actions from psychology state licensing boards. She identified that each state's licensing board laws differ in some way. The process of investigation of a filed board complaint is often different (Williams, 2001). Van Horne (2004) found that licensing boards can serve as an "investigator, prosecutor, judge, jury, and appeals court" (p. 170). Additionally, state licensing boards can assign a wide variety of disciplinary actions against a licensed psychologist ranging from fines to revocation of their licensure for any violation they find (Boland-Prom et al., 2015; Krom, 2019). Further, Van Horne (2004) explained problems with boards assigning a variety of disciplinary actions are psychologists often do not know their rights and defend themselves with unsuccessful results. The board does not only review the complaint filed but investigates every aspect of the practice and complaint. There is complexity in the board complaint process as well as a lack of training that psychologists receive in coping with the complaint process.

Additionally, psychologists experience frequent issues that surface while working with high conflict custody cases.

Bow and Martindale (2009) developed a survey to investigate frequent issues with psychologists who work with child custody cases. Their quantitative study focused on 354 psychologists who primarily work with this population in their practice. They found that psychologists who work with high conflict custody cases have a higher risk of board complaints. Bow and Martindale (2009) explained the higher the conflict between parents, the higher the risk of a board complaint. They also asserted that psychologists who work with this population have a higher degree of stress (80%) and fear (56%) of receiving a board complaint and often experienced emotional anguish and stress. They stated that 75% of custody cases are court ordered for further evaluation and that 32% psychologists often did not receive training on child custody evaluations.

Psychologists not only experience significant distress from receiving and waiting for the conclusion of a board complaint, but also in their response time of a complaint. In the Schoenfeld et al., (2001) study, participants were also annoyed and anxious because a time imbalance existed with the board's ability to investigate a claim in a timely manner. They explained psychologists were required to respond to a board complaint within 10 days; however, there was no time limit on the board's process to conclude the complaint.

Conversely, state licensing boards must follow their statute and policies when determining the outcome of a board complaint (Boland-Prom & Alvarez, 2014). Looking into every aspect of a psychologist's practice and complaint not only seems to be the goal and role of state licensing boards but causes much undue anxiety on the psychologists

(Williams, 2001). Krom (2019) studied 14,900 enforcement actions taken by professional boards regulating psychologists, attorneys, certified professional accountant's, and physicians. She found inconsistent treatment toward licensed psychologists as well as a multitude of inequitable treatment, which caused undue anxiety for them. As a result, this inequality raised concerns about the role of state licensing boards to have equal protection for all licensed psychologists (Krom, 2019). Moreover, Williams (2001) also reviewed the literature in regard to psychologist's maltreatment by state licensing boards. He asserted that state licensing boards have biases and hold certain attitudes and beliefs that a psychologist who received a board complaint must have done something wrong.

Overall, board complaints have steadily increased since 1998 due to a variety of issues that are presented to state licensing boards (Wilkinson et al., 2019). The majority of the research conducted was based on the statistical data of board complaints of psychologists who work with high-conflict custody cases, which has included the total number, types of board complaints, and types of discipline received. Research has focused on a psychologist's competency issues and emotional experiences from receiving a board complaint. Further, research was also conducted on the issues that psychologists have experienced and perceived from their state licensing board process. State licensing boards have the discretion to look into every aspect of a psychologist's complaint and practice. According to the research, boards may take a more punitive approach with marriage and family therapists; however, the board's overall goal is to protect the public. It is clear that more research is needed with specific populations served by psychologists, such as high conflict custody cases. Additionally, there is very little research on how a

psychologist has coped with the discipline and how it changed their practice if at all. As a result, past research has focused on board complaints from a statistical perspective, however, it is clear this is no longer current and is already saturated. Therefore, a qualitative study focused on a psychologist's reactions, coping strategies, and changes in their professional practice is warranted.

Disciplined Received: Psychologist's Coping Strategies

There is very limited research on the coping strategies that psychologists use to deal with a board complaint or discipline received from a complaint. Past researchers have focused on the emotional reactions of psychologists and have offered many strategies to deal with board complaints. However, the strategies offered are broad and leave much room for ambiguity. For example, Glassman (1998) compared data from the American Psychological Association (APA) on custody evaluation complaints received against a psychologist's license from 1990 to 1994. He was interested in identifying the common complaints filed in order to reduce the risk of receiving a board complaint. He asserted that psychologists who work with child custody cases learned to manage a board complaint. Glassman (1998) stated psychologists managed their experience with feelings of anger, fear, anxiety, sleep issues, retaliation desires, and became upset throughout the process. Moreover, Montgomery et al. (1999) conducted a quantitative study of 596 psychologists who received a licensing board complaint, however, they did not limit their search to work with high-conflict custody cases. Montgomery et al. (1999) stated that psychologists relied on their positive coping strategies, such as their support system and

relaxing activities; but, lacked specific details of who they relied on and what activities helped them.

Not only do psychologists use positive coping strategies, but they also use negative coping strategies. Thomas (2005) identified the following types of negative coping strategies psychologists used to deal with a board complaint that resulted in discipline: defensiveness of self, increased stress, worry, anger, and shock. Glassman (1998) noted that psychologists should accept responsibility for their mistake as a positive coping strategy and learn from it. Kirkland and Kirkland (2001) urged psychologists to protect themselves at whatever cost, however, they did not provide steps or coping strategies to achieve this goal. Thomas (2005) also urged the importance of a support system and professional resources as an option for psychologists in the future to use as a coping strategy. However, it is clear that more research needs to be conducted to identify the damage discipline from a board complaint has on a psychologist.

There is very little research on the coping strategies that psychologists have used or should use if they receive a board complaint and subsequent discipline from the complaint. Psychologists who work with high conflict custody cases have a higher likelihood of receiving a board complaint. There is virtually no research on how they are supposed to cope with a board complaint and subsequent discipline. However, there is a demand for psychologists to work in this specialty area. It is also known that most psychologists will experience the board complaint process within their state licensing board because of their work on high conflict custody cases. It is very clear there is a need to further research this issue because of the high risk and significant distress that

psychologists experience when working on high conflict custody cases but also through the board complaint process. Additionally, there is a clear gap in the research on a psychologist's coping strategies used and changes in their professional practice due to receiving discipline from their state licensing board.

Disciplined Received: Changes to Psychologist's Professional Practice

Thomas (2005) identified a common theme of psychologists being disciplined for something that was not part of the original complaint investigation. Thomas (2005) and Neukrug et al. (2001) found a common outcome for discipline are continuing education and supervision requirements. Thomas (2014) studied clinical supervision related to the common board complaints and asserted it is a common result included in disciplinary action against a psychologist. She stated the primary objective of clinical supervision resulted from a board complaint is to rehabilitate the psychologist back to ethical practice and professional ethical behavior. As a result, the point is for the psychologist to not repeat the offense. Thomas (2014) found that psychologists, who have been disciplined, are often angry, guarded, and behave with defensiveness when working with a supervisor. Further, she found that there is financial, emotional, and psychological damage experienced by psychologists who have to participate in supervision as part of their rehabilitative process.

It has been found that a board complaint against a psychologist can destroy their career (VanHorne, 2004). Vacha-Haase et al. (2019) offered a comprehensive guide of remediation strategies for health professionals who experienced issues with their professional competencies. They asserted that problems with professional practice are

common due to a lack of remediation policies with psychologists in training. Moreover, Vacha-Haase et al. (2019) claimed there is insufficient training in regard to a psychologist's professional practice after discipline was received. Thomas (2014) found that psychologists who are ordered to participate in supervision as part of their discipline requirements and rehabilitative process must find a supervising psychologist who is trained in supervisory practice. Moreover, she asserted the psychologists should be competent, include informed consent, and maintain confidentiality with their supervisees. This is also an ethical standard in the field of psychology in general; however, ethical practice becomes more important when fulfillment of disciplinary action is required. Vacha-Haase et al. (2019) claimed a remediation process needs to include the areas of development for psychologists, which potentially eliminates issues in their future. They asserted that a plan that is tailored to the trainee ensures ethical, competent practices in the field. Lastly, Vacha-Haase et al. (2019) concluded a remediation plan reduces a trainee's "sense of shame, helplessness, and stigma" (p. 2) related to their lack of competencies. It is clear based on the results of these studies that there is a need for a specific remediation program that includes supervision as well as specific strategies to overcome the most common mistakes. Additionally, there is a need for understanding the changes in a psychologist's professional practice after they received discipline, such as completion of the remediation plan ordered from their state licensing boards.

Thomas (2005) identified the following impact on a psychologist's professional practice: removal from insurance provider panels, loss of hospital privileges, loss of membership to professional associations, financial losses, and loss of malpractice

insurance. She stated there were significant impacts and implications to a psychologist's clinical work. Additionally, Montgomery et al. (1999) found that 25.9% of board complaints ended in favor of the psychologist, however, 34.5% were adversely impacted in their professional practice. However, no details about what, in particular was impacted, and the impact on a psychologist's professional practice was not further investigated in this study. Montgomery et al. (1999) stated that psychologists coped in a negative manner but did not provide specific details about how this was defined either.

There is very little research on how discipline received from a board complaint that was filed from a high-conflict custody case impact's a psychologist's professional practice. The little research on this topic reflects the potential of a significant impact on a psychologist's professional practice. Moreover, the research conducted has been quantitative in nature and not qualitative, which further supports the need for this study. Lastly, there is also a need to further investigate not only the changes that occurred within a psychologist's practice but how they coped with the discipline and subsequent changes.

Methodology

Research on Methodology

Basic qualitative designs are used with the intent to gain a better understanding of individuals in their natural settings to explain the experiences they have lived (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). Moreover, basic qualitative designs are used to understand how people make meaning from their world and experiences (Merriam, 2002). Merriam (2009) explained that basic designs focus on the interpretation, construction, and meaning that people attach to their lived experiences. Additionally, basic qualitative designs build

an in-depth description of the phenomenon being studied (Lim, 2011). A basic qualitative study was used to identify codes, categories, and themes most commonly found in this study. This study was designed to explore psychologists' coping strategies and changes in their professional practices because of discipline received from their state licensing board. A basic qualitative study was the most effective approach because it uncovered the rich descriptions from the lived experiences of psychologists and the meaning they attached to their lived experience.

Summary of Findings

The literature outlines fairly well what a person must do to become a psychologist. There is also extensive research on the ethical responsibilities of a psychologist. There is a moderate amount of research on specialty areas within the field of psychology, such as high conflict custody cases and board complaints. Specifically, the primary research methodology found in the literature is quantitative analysis on the statistical data of board complaints, reasons for filing, and the fear that psychologists have in working with this population. However, there is a clear gap in the literature with psychologists who work with high conflict custody cases.

There is also a glaring gap in the literature on what coping strategies a psychologist uses to cope with discipline received from a board complaint filed due to their work with high conflict custody cases. The overall research identified that a psychologist experiences a significant amount of fear and distress when working with high conflict custody cases. However, there is no research to support how they are supposed to manage these emotions. Moreover, a significant finding in the research is

that psychologists who work with this population should expect a board complaint.

However, there is no research to state how a psychologist should cope with this process or discipline they receive.

Additionally, there was very little research on how the discipline received from a board complaint changes the professional practice of a psychologist. However, it is clear in the research that a significant impact occurs, such as financial and insurance panel losses. There was also an issue that was found in the research where specific details of the changes in a psychologist's practice were not identified. The literature gave broad examples, but not specific details of what changed and how a psychologist is supposed to manage these losses. Moreover, there was a clear gap in the training programs centered around this specialty area, which may contribute to the lack of coping strategies and management around the changes in a psychologist's professional practice. Lastly, there was a clear gap in the literature on qualitative studies that focused on psychologist's who are disciplined from receiving a board complaint from their state licensing board due to their work with high conflict custody cases and what coping strategies and changes in their professional practice occurred as a result. This study attempts to fill this gap and is clearly warranted. In the following chapter, I will outline the research methodology that will be used to explore the experience of psychologist's who received discipline from a board complaint due to working with high conflict custody cases.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and understand the meaning of the experiences of psychologists who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and have received discipline from their state licensing board. Psychologists described their coping strategies to receiving the disciplinary action and if it changed their professional practice. My goal was to better understand how psychologists cope and change their professional practice after receiving discipline from their state licensing board, especially since there is an increased level of distress experienced from those who work on high conflict custody cases. In chapters 1 and 2, I provided an overview of the study, while reviewing both the seminal and current literature I became acutely aware of the need for this study. The coping strategies and the changes in a psychologist's professional practice after receiving discipline from a state licensing board because of working on high conflict custody cases is unknown currently. This gap in the body of research provides a unique opportunity. Due to the increased risk and distress experienced from working with high conflict custody cases, there is reason to explore this topic through qualitative research. After reviewing the current research, I suspected that psychologists who work with high conflict custody cases have a higher likelihood of receiving a board complaint, which can adversely affect their level of distress, coping strategies, and their professional practices.

In this chapter, I expand on the methodology by covering (a) purpose of the study, (b) assumptions and rationale for qualitative design, (c) target population and participation selection, (d) procedures, (e) instruments, (f) research questions and hypotheses, (g) data analysis, (h) ethical considerations, and (i) expected findings.

Research Design and Rationale

Basic qualitative designs are used with the intent to gain a better understanding of individuals in their natural settings to explain the experiences they have lived (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). Moreover, basic qualitative designs are used to understand how people make meaning from their world and experiences (Merriam, 2002). Merriam (2009) explained that basic designs focus on the interpretation, construction, and meaning that people attach to their lived experiences. Additionally, basic qualitative designs help to build an in-depth description of the phenomenon being studied (Lim, 2011). I utilized a basic qualitative study to identify codes, categories, and themes most commonly found in this current study. I designed this study to explore psychologists' coping strategies and changes in their professional practice because of discipline received from their state licensing board. I chose this basic qualitative study because I believe it is the most effective approach to uncover the rich descriptions from the lived experiences of psychologists and the meaning they attached to their lived experience.

I conducted semistructured in-depth interviews with practicing psychologists about their coping strategies and changes in professional practices after they received discipline from their state licensing board. I interviewed each of the participants individually about their lived experiences of coping strategies and changes in their

professional practice after receiving the discipline. As a result, I was able to better understand the coping strategies they used and changes that they made to their professional practice. The research questions were:

RQ1: How do psychologists, who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and who received disciplinary action, describe the coping strategies they used?

RQ2: How do psychologists, who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and who received disciplinary action describe how it influenced change in their professional practice?

I chose a basic qualitative research design because it was the best fit for these research questions as it drew from their interpretation, construction, and the meaning they attached to their lived experiences. By way of this design, I came away with a richer description about how receiving discipline affects a psychologist.

For this study, I used an integrative qualitative data analysis approach to explore the experiences of psychologists who have been disciplined. Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carl (2016) described this type of analysis as a means by which a researcher can better understand the participants experience through intentionality in understanding their lived experiences. I focused this approach on the generalized experiences of the participants. The reader should understand that this approach uses intentionality in interpreting and analyzing the experiences of the participants.

Role of the Researcher

For this study, I was the only researcher. This established me as the singular data collection instrument included within this research study. I was the sole interviewer for the participants in this study as well as the only data interpreter. I utilized the existing research to design the semistructured in-depth interview questions.

I did not have personal or professional relationships with any of the participants within this study, which eliminated any issues with dual or multiple relationships. This aligns with the American Psychological Association [APA] (2002a) ethics code. I provided no incentives nor reimbursement to the interviewees for their participation study.

Based on the design of the study, I expected multiple interactions with the participants. I asked the participants to participate in approximately 60 minutes of a semistructured in-depth interview with me. Moreover, I asked them to do member checking and remain available for follow-up questions based on the feedback from the member checking process. I also asked them to review the data analysis and interpretation. Specifically, I sent emails to the participants that included the emerging themes and their part of the interviews that was included within the dissertation to verify that I accurately portrayed their experiences and meaning. Moreover, within this same email, I did not include additional questions from the transcription because I did not need clarification. I asked the participants to respond to the email within 1 week. I informed them that I may have to verify their additional information once received to ensure I accurately described their lived experiences. Lastly, I did not need to ask them to say

more about specific areas because I did not inaccurately portray their story. It took the participants less than 60 minutes to complete the follow-up processes. I included their responses and used them for data analysis purposes.

Additionally, as a licensed therapist who currently works with high conflict custody cases and has been disciplined, I am acutely aware of the need for this research. I acknowledge that I may have unintentional biases that stem from a) my past and current experience working with high conflict custody cases, b) my lived experience with the discipline process itself, c) the coping strategies that I personally used as I went through this process, and d) the changes that I made to my own professional practices, which may yield unintentional biases. I recognize my own personal and professional biases and experiences regarding receiving discipline because of working with high conflict custody cases. I established steps to address these biases and remain balanced in this research in the discussion of trustworthiness. Reflexive journaling was the primary tool that I used to maintain a record of personal and professional biases through the duration of the study. I wrote in the journal during each step of the process, which I further explain below.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The target population for this study consisted of individuals who meet the criteria as licensed psychologists working within the United States. These individuals may no longer be licensed psychologists as a result of the discipline received from their state licensing board or because of the professional practice changes they engaged in due to receiving discipline. Given the design of the research and the nature of the research

questions, I used purposive sampling to recruit participants. By using purposive sampling, I gathered a specific group of participants who met the inclusion criteria for the research. Specifically, I used the criterion-based case selection because participants that were selected needed to meet the inclusion criteria to be studied (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This sampling method results in data that is more consistent with the aim of the research, and I used this method to understand both the coping strategies employed by psychologists along with the changes in their professional practice after receiving disciplinary action from their state licensing board.

Additionally, I used both snowball and purposive sampling in the recruitment of participants. Snowball sampling starts with one or two participants who are interviewed and then those participants recommend additional contacts to be interviewed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I solicited recommendations directly and verbally at the end of the interview that included a name and contact email address. The recommended participants did not meet the inclusion criteria; however, I asked them if they had additional psychologists to recommend. Upon receiving these recommendations, I used the same process for recruitment for other relevant contacts who provided different or confirming perspectives.

Snowball sampling was useful in recruiting psychologists who work with high conflict custody cases since the percentage of psychologists who work with this population is smaller than the overall psychologist population. Additionally, psychologists within this specialty area typically refer clients to one another, which creates a community. As a result, snowball sampling was useful since the participants in

this study have to work with a specific population and were difficult to find.

Psychologists were hesitant to come forward because they have been disciplined and, as previous research supports, they often feel shame. I found snowball sampling to be helpful in creating relationships with potential participants because I have been personally disciplined as a result of my work with high-conflict custody cases.

Initially, I sent each of the participants an email invitation (see Appendix A). Each state licensing board publicizes the discipline psychologists have received dating back many years. The publication includes the following: the psychologist's name, their address, either their phone number or email address, the date their discipline occurred, the reason for the discipline, and the discipline they received. The discipline they received is typically within a court order that is hyperlinked next to the name of the psychologist. When an email or phone number was not provided, I looked at LinkedIn or their professional website for the professional contact information of each psychologist listed. If a psychologist did not have a professional website or LinkedIn site, I moved on to the next potential participant. After I received an email address for the psychologist, I sent an initial email (see Appendix A) to each psychologist individually outlining their invitation to participate in my study. I resent the initial email 1 week later and then again, 2 weeks later. I only emailed the potential participants three times asking them if they would be willing to participate in this study. Lastly, I sent a mass email to all participants and blind copied each of them.

I asked all potential participants to email me directly if they were interested in the study. The initial email provided a brief explanation of the purpose of the study. Once I

received the initial email from each of the participants, I replied and verified that each of them met the inclusion criteria for the study. I included the inclusion criteria in my response and asked them to verify that they meet criteria. Additionally, I conducted a state licensing board search to verify they are or have been licensed and received discipline if the participant came from snowball sampling. Lastly, I sent an email to those who did not meet inclusion criteria and were not asked to participate in the study (see Appendix B). The purpose of the email was to thank them for their willingness to participate and to identify the inclusion criteria they did not meet.

Inclusion criteria for each participant within this study included the following primary characteristics. Participants in the study must have held a doctoral degree. I did not include master level clinicians in this study. The participants must have been currently or previously licensed as a psychologist in the state in which they received the disciplinary action. Additionally, they must have had experience working with at least one high conflict custody case. Lastly, participants must have received disciplinary action from their state licensing board because of their work on a high conflict custody case.

I targeted licensed psychologists who work with high conflict custody cases based on several factors. Psychologists are required to have a higher level of education and training than master level clinicians. Moreover, there is an increase in board complaints each year (ASPPB, 2019; Francis et al., 2018). Lastly, there is an increased demand for trained psychologists to work on high conflict custody cases (Francis et al., 2018).

Due to the specific nature of this study, I excluded psychologists who received discipline for any other specialty area outside of high conflict custody cases as well as

master level clinicians. Further, I excluded psychologists who received a board complaint but no discipline because the focus of this study was how psychologists coped and changed their professional practice after they received discipline. I purposely used these exclusion criteria in order to maintain the goal of the current study and to align the purpose and research questions to the sample with a range of eight to 12 participants.

Based on the literature and methodology, I estimated I would reach saturation between eight to 12 participants. Regarding saturation and sample size, Merriam and Grenier (2019) explained that saturation occurs once the same patterns and themes emerge from the data collection. Moreover, Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated that saturation occurs when new information no longer creates new insights, themes, or reveals new information about the topic. Therefore, saturation in this study occurred when the semistructured in-depth interviews continued to reveal the same categories or themes previously found with the participants. This is indicative of an adequate sample size for this current study (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). With a range of eight to 12 participants set for this study, it is likely that saturation will occur, however, it was monitored and once it occurred the interviews will stop. There were no other participants waiting to be interviewed. Therefore, there was no purpose in sending an email to explain that saturation had occurred and that I no longer needed them for the study.

Instrumentation

In this basic qualitative study, I was the only interviewer and the primary instrument. I compiled data for this instrument through interviews that I personally conducted. Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carl (2016) maintained interviews are a good

method of data collection for a basic qualitative research design. The semistructured in-depth interviews may yield additional information with some prompting from me; whereas, structured interviewing would have limited this ability. The semistructured in-depth interviews occurred in one-on-one settings. I conducted the interviews with a sample of six currently licensed psychologists that met the current inclusion criteria for the study. The interviews were made up of nine open-ended interview questions with follow-up questions for clarification. The interviews took approximately 60 minutes to complete with each participant. These questions can be found in Appendix C.

I created the interview questions from the research conducted on the transactional theory of stress and coping. This theory asserts that an individual goes through a cognitive appraisal process that informs their emotional reactions stemming from previous experiences and creates their current coping strategies (Lazarus, 1963). I intended that the interview questions would elicit open-ended responses that would provoke follow-up questions, such as “tell me more” as needed. Moreover, I intended that the interview questions would initiate a story telling response (see Brinkman & Kvale, 2015) from the psychologist about their experience with their state licensing boards, high conflict custody cases, discipline received, and their coping strategies and changes to their professional practice.

Additionally, I developed my research questions with information provided by the existing research. The current body of literature emphasizes the significant distress that a psychologist experiences due to receiving a board complaint. Moreover, the research supports that working with high conflict custody cases is a higher risk specialty area to

practice. Lastly, the research supports that most psychologists who work with this specialized population should expect to receive a board complaint at some point in their career. As a result, I intended that the research questions would elicit the lived experiences of the psychologists who received discipline to further describe the coping strategies used and changes within their professional practice after they received the discipline. Lastly, there was a significant gap in the literature on this topic using a qualitative design. The research has been heavily focused on the statistical nature of board complaints and feelings experienced using quantitative designs. Therefore, using a qualitative design to study a psychologist's experience after they received discipline from their state licensing board was warranted.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) maintained that interviewing is an effective means of data collection in basic qualitative studies, where the interview is being used to gather information that a traditional measure would not be able to fully grasp. Additionally, the interviews and I served as valuable interpretations of the data collected. The interviewer creates the questions, guides the interview, and directs the process to ensure a more structured data collection method (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I established content validity since the interview questions stemmed from the research questions. I structured the overarching interview questions about receiving discipline around the psychologist's coping strategies and changes in their professional practices. I, the interview questions, and the audio recording established sufficient data recording methods. his method, I allowed for direct observation and data collection as well as a review of the transcripts. This also served as a means to evaluate the data several times throughout the process.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

For this study, I gathered a sample size of six using all 50 state licensing board's publications of disciplined psychologists. Each state publicly lists psychologists who have been disciplined, which is included on their website for public access. The discipline information is accessible to anyone in the public and they can retrieve the information at any time. Each state provides the following information publicly: psychologist's name, address, email or phone number, reason for discipline, and discipline received. State licensing boards have the information listed under the psychologist's webpage, specifically, the disciplined psychologist lists that is a separate webpage provided by each state licensing board. No permission to access this information is required for any of the 50 state licensing boards. Potential participants were emailed directly as described previously. I personally selected the sample based on the inclusion criteria previously mentioned and on a first come basis.

I administered a request for participation through the list that I received from the state licensing board. This email can be found in Appendix A. I recruited participants via email and they voluntarily responded. I selected them based on the inclusion criteria included within the email and previously outlined. I sent the email from my Walden University email. I provided consent forms via email in a digital PDF file immediately following the participants' interest in being a participant with a request for them to read, sign, and return to me within 48 hours, which I expected would take them no more than 5 minutes to complete. If I did not receive the consent form, I then sent another email at the beginning of the scheduled interview to ensure completion prior to beginning the

semistructured interview. The consent form included an agreement to participate in a semistructured in-depth interview for approximately sixty minutes, the interview would be audio recorded, mandated reporting procedures since I am a licensed clinician in the state of Colorado, and follow-up questions and emails that may occur. Additionally, the consent form included their right to stop their participation in the study at any time. Each participant was asked to sign and return the signed consent form back to me via email when they agreed to participate in the current study. If the participant declined after review of the consent form, the interview did not continue, and I found a new participant based on the criteria previously mentioned. I scheduled the interviews via email at a mutually agreed upon time, which was primarily dependent on the participant's schedule. I confirmed the scheduled interview via email with each participant to ensure my accuracy.

I conducted the interviews via video, using semistructured questions along with follow-up questions for clarification when needed. Participants did not have to travel or meet at an agreed upon location due to the current global pandemic. Rather, participants needed to coordinate with the researcher to determine a mutually agreed upon time. I emailed the participants asking for their availability to participate in the interview. I scheduled the interviews via email with each participant, primarily accommodating the participant's schedules. I conducted each interview via ZOOM from my private office. Participants had the ability to choose their site, thereby ensuring their privacy.

The interviews lasted approximately sixty minutes. I asked each of the participants the nine semistructured questions. Based on the participants responses, I then

asked follow-up and/or clarifying questions of the participants. Moreover, clarifying questions gained additional information as the need arose during the interviews. I used an audio recorder to record the interviews.

I kept an audio recording of each of the interviews. I transcribed each of the interviews into written format and then analyzed them following the interviews. Once the interview was completely transcribed, I used headphones to listen to the recording while reading the transcription to ensure accuracy and credibility of the transcription.

Data Analysis Plan

I selected a basic qualitative analysis as a means to identify themes within the recorded data. Rubin and Rubin (2012) outline this analysis as a way to ensure ethical and intentional data analysis. They highlighted the need to not be rigid and guided by structured procedures, but rather have flexibility in the interpretation of the analysis with a guided approach. I used the following steps as my primary data analysis plan.

Multiple Reading and Making Notes

As the first step in my data analysis process, I included a review of the interviews, transcripts, and field notes that were collected after the interviews. My goal with this step was to fully immerse myself in the data as a means to uncover the meaning that was identified by the participants. I also included additional notes about the codes that were discovered and identified during this step.

Transforming Notes into Emergent Themes

For step two, I categorized the codes and then identified themes. I organized the data into categories of themes from the common codes found in step one. By identifying

themes, I was able to better understand the common coping strategies and changes in professional practices of the participants.

Clustering Themes

The third step in analyzing the available data set was to identify the reoccurring themes and organize the data based on these common characteristics. By clustering these themes, I was able to expand the perspective of the participants, while still allowing me to pull the detail of the overarching themes identified. Moreover, understanding the transactional theory of stress and coping informed the clustering of themes. Specifically, I clustered the themes into cognitive appraisal, coping strategies, and changes in professional practice.

Repeat and Note

In the final step in my data analysis plan, I looked at codes from the previous steps. I reviewed each of the categories and themes from steps one and two of coding. I both reviewed the journal and analysis and identified the themes that emerged. Moreover, I tracked my biases, via journaling, as stated in step one and two. I also tracked the influences that occurred during the interview process by reviewing the notes taken during the interview. Lastly, I looked at the number of codes and themes created and incorporated peer debriefing to check bias and accurately track data. To make sure that my analysis was credible and that I did not miss any themes, I looked for the strategy and differences in case analysis. I also reviewed my coding for any gaps that I may have missed. Where I did notice gaps, I repeated steps one through three to determine if I overlooked any themes in the first process. I gained a deeper level of interpretation that

ensured that all of the themes of the participants were recognized and used in the data analysis process. Moreover, I was able to identify any missed data that were pertinent to the study. I did not use any software during my data analysis process.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to data credibility and reliability in qualitative studies. Rubin and Rubin (2012) identify four key components of maintaining validity: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In order to maintain trustworthiness in this study, I used their four key components to ensure valid results, which I explain below. I also included prolonged engagement, member checking, and peer debriefing in this study.

Credibility

Credibility specifically refers to the interviewer's ability to take in all of the information from the participants and identify the patterns that are not easily explained (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). My goal was to present the findings as truth to the participants. For this study, I used prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, and member checking as recommended by Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carl (2016).

Prolonged Engagement

I used prolonged engagement and took extended time with the participants to account for patterns that may impact the data collection process. The purpose was to be aware of and remove biases especially with researchers who can relate to the research study (see Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). In this context, I am the interviewer who can personally relate to the study and participants, so reactivity and bias may be a

concern. My primary purpose for selecting this technique was to be aware of my own biases and ideally remove them from the interview and data analysis process.

Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing is a technique where another person is asked to review the data analysis and interpretation to check for bias potentials. This other person is not involved in the research study at all. The goal is for this person to find any biases that may have occurred during the interview or data analysis process (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). The purpose of this technique was to put an additional measure in place to ensure my own personal experiences are not biasing the interpretation of the data.

Member Checking

Member checking is a technique that allowed me to ask the participants for feedback on the data analysis and interpretation specific to potential bias. I asked each of the participants to look at the themes I identified to verify if they are an accurate representation of what they experienced. The steps for this have already been outlined. By using this technique, I was able follow-up with them, and, as previously outlined, to ensure accurate responses from the participants. This helped ensure a more valid data analysis process. The purpose of this technique was to put an additional measure in place to ensure this researcher's own personal experiences were not influencing the recording of the raw data.

Transferability

Transferability refers to developing a qualitative study that can be transferable, not generalizable to the qualitative study (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). The use of

thick descriptions was used to enhance the transferability of the data analysis process and provided more detailed explanations of the participants experiences (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I included the following information, which is not transferable to the general population due to the qualitative nature of this study: the number of years the psychologist has practiced in high-conflict custody cases, the psychologist's gender, details of the high-conflict custody case, such as parents that sabotaged each other and/or an aggressive parent. No other information about the high-conflict custody case was included or details of the discipline received due to the confidentiality of the client as well as the psychologist. I put this information into the context of the analysis and directly quoted within the data analysis chapter. I discussed the sample in the data analysis. For example, I covered topics such as whether they believed they did anything wrong, whether they felt like a victim, whether there was an ethical misstep, along with any other variations that I identified within the sample. Lastly, I discussed the following information about the psychologist: how long they have been licensed and how long they have practiced in high conflict cases because both impact transferability. Both the recruitment and sample did influence the data because they have received discipline due to their work on high conflict custody cases. The sample in this current study was not a homogenous sample because each of their experiences are unique.

Dependability

Dependability refers to reliability in quantitative research, which is the stability of the data (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). Moreover, it refers to the degree to which the data collected from the interviews and data analysis process is dependable. The key is

to be consistent with all participants, interviews, data collection, and analysis procedures (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). I maintained a log of each of the above steps that I took at the time of the transition, which ensured consistency of the procedures and for other researchers to repeat. Doing so enhanced the dependability of the results and the analysis of such. Moreover, audit trails are an in-depth approach to illustrating that the findings of this study are based on the participants' narratives and involve describing the collection and analysis of the data in a transparent manner (see Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). Lastly, as previously discussed, I used member checking to ensure the accuracy and dependability of the data analysis and interpretation.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to objectivity in quantitative research, which means the removal of claiming to be objective (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). Creating a log of the steps taken aided me in maintaining my objectivity during the entire research study. Moreover, it helped to minimize any of my own potential biases. Lastly, my efforts at peer debriefing and member checking steps held me accountable as I attempted to remove biases, remain objective, and create valid data analyses and results.

Reflexivity and Reflexive Journaling

The last technique in this step and another one to ensure confirmability was reflexivity and reflexive journaling. Reflexivity refers to the researcher being intentional about having an awareness of their biases (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). I used reflexive journaling as a technique where I maintained a journal of my reactions, which

included my attitudes, beliefs, and reactions that arose throughout the interview and data analysis processes.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical issues are governed by the American Psychological Association for licensed psychologists. The *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* include specific ethical guidelines for practicing psychologists. This code is used as a guideline for filing board complaints against a psychologist for perceived misconduct for the general population, and as a guide for state licensing boards in determining if a breach has occurred. Psychologists are strongly encouraged to follow these guidelines.

I have no concerns that an ethical violation occurred during this study. The participants were all voluntary and were encouraged in advance to stop at any time prior to or during the process. They were neither involved in an experiment, ever asked to perform unethical tasks, nor privy to the other participants interviews or responses.

Nonetheless, there are a few ethical considerations that needed to be addressed in this study. First of all, in the event that a participant was to have disclosed, during the interview, any harm to self, others, or potential abuse allegations, I would have had a duty to report. I am a licensed professional counselor and a licensed addiction counselor and am mandated to report any of the above concerns. I disclosed this duty to the participants at the beginning of the study and included that disclosure in the consent form. I did not do a harm or abuse assessment or report within this study.

Information, including names, licensure numbers, and location practices were coded to ensure confidentiality. All recordings, including the written and the audio

device, will be stored securely for a minimum of five years following collection. After seven years, all records and data will be deleted or otherwise destroyed. Information retained will include interview recordings, transcripts of the recordings, process notes collected during and after the interview and the data analysis processes, and any other data collected during the research study.

Additionally, confidentiality was ensured within this study. I am specifically referring to the following information: details of the high conflict custody case, board complaint(s) filed against the psychologist, and any disciplined received. Themes from the high conflict custody cases, such as aggressive behaviors, and any discipline, such as continuing education, was disclosed within the data interpretation process. Additionally, I used the participant's coded names when referring to their voice and myself when referring to my voice throughout the data analysis. This ensured that I minimized my biases and did not color the voice of the data from the participants. The confidential information from this study was not shared with anyone outside of my dissertation chair, who is directly involved with this study.

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the design of this study as well as the protocols for interviewing the psychologists who met the criteria to be involved in this study. This included my reasoning as to why the interview protocols were the best fit for these research questions. As described throughout the chapter, I developed specific procedures to recruit participants including the creation of the consent form. I both developed the initial interview questions and asked the follow-up questions as warranted based on the

participant's responses throughout the interview process. My goal during the semistructured, in-depth interview design was to align the process such that I could further explore and understand the coping strategies and changes in professional practices of psychologists who have been disciplined because of their work with high conflict custody cases. This type of design aligns well with the purpose of the study, which was to explore how psychologists who work with high conflict custody cases used coping strategies and changed their professional practice to deal with discipline they received.

I purposefully designed this study to minimize the likelihood that any ethical issues may have arisen, and I do not believe that any such issues arose. The study was exploratory in nature, did not include any experimental designs, and did not target a vulnerable population. Participants were licensed psychologists who either remain in good standing with their state licensing board or are no longer connected to it, which reduced any potential vulnerabilities. Next, in chapter 4, I will discuss the data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction to the Current Study

In the current body of literature, there is very little research on the coping strategies and changes in a psychologist's professional practice due to discipline received from board complaints. Psychologists are expected to practice ethically and engage in continuing education and research (Horn et al., 2019). However, exposure to high conflict custody cases brings worry and fear of having a board complaint filed against their license despite the increased demand for psychologists to work with high conflict custody cases (Bow & Martindale, 2009; Wilkinson et al., 2019). There are clear gaps in the research regarding the coping strategies and changes in professional practices of psychologists who have been disciplined and work with high conflict custody cases (Saini et al., 2012; Wilkinson et al., 2019).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and understand the meaning of the experiences of psychologists who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and have received discipline from their state licensing board. Psychologists described their coping strategies to receiving the disciplinary action and if it changed their professional practice. The following were the research questions of this study:

RQ1: How do psychologists, who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and who received disciplinary action, describe the coping strategies they used?

RQ2: How do psychologists, who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and who received disciplinary action describe how it influenced change in their professional practice?

This chapter will discuss the results of the current study. It will include the setting where the study took place, participant demographics, and the data collected throughout the study. In this chapter, I will discuss the data analysis process and the results of this study.

Setting

I conducted video interviews to gather data with participants who met the inclusion criteria for the study. Participants were selected based on order of response to the recruitment email sent out through my Walden University email. Interviews were conducted over the internet via Zoom for several weeks. The interviews took place in a private office setting with a closed door, with video interactions for the duration of the interviews. Participants appeared to be in a variety of settings, some noting their home office while others appeared to be at a work setting. In all instances, participants remained within the noted settings and were not interrupted by others. Each participant remained in front of their computer on camera through the duration of the interview. Interruptions did not occur during the interviews.

I provided no incentives for participation. To date, there were no known conditions that may have influenced participants in their experiences during interviews. I am not aware of any environmental factors that would have impacted this study.

Demographics

During recruitment, eight potential participants that met the inclusion criteria responded with interest to participate. Participants that were included in this study consisted of six adults who were currently licensed psychologists in a variety of practice settings. Saturation was reached after the sixth interview. Saturation is reached when the participants do not provide any new information to the research questions, which occurred with the fifth and sixth participant. The group comprised two female and four male licensed psychologists. This group is not representative of the current licensed psychologists' demographics due to the small sample size. Table 1 below illustrates some of the participant demographics identified during the interviews.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Geographic Region	Years Licensed
1	Male	60-69	Colorado, United States	17 years
2	Male	60-69	New Jersey, United States	35 years
3	Female	40-49	Tennessee, United States	17 years
4	Female	60-69	Florida, United States	28 years
5	Male	60-69	Florida, United States	30 years
6	Male	50-59	Florida, United States	30 years

Data Collection

Data collection occurred across all participants for the study ($N=6$). I collected these data via internet-based video conferencing through a semistructured interview. Participant consent was given and documented and verified at the beginning of each interview. Interview questions are in Appendix C. I conducted the interviews over the course of several weeks and only included one interview per participant. The interviews

lasted between 40 to 60 minutes and were audio recorded. The interview times were varied because of the respondent's answers; some of the respondents were brief while others were not. I recorded each interview using a Voice Memo app audio recording device for further data analysis. There were no variations to the data collection method mentioned in Chapter 3 of this study. Additionally, there were no unusual circumstances noted during the data collection process that would be of note or would impact the results of the study to my knowledge. Audio recording of each interview was made and transcribed, to support data analysis.

Data Analysis

During the data analysis process, I realized that saturation was reached at the sixth participant because no new information was provided by the sixth participant. The fifth and sixth participants provided the same information as the first four participants. As a result, I concluded that saturation had been reached. In addition, I realized that the data from this group provided the basis for understanding the experiences of psychologists who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and have received discipline from their state licensing board.

Data collected in this study were analyzed and coded based on a basic qualitative analysis (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012) and selected as a means to identify themes and subthemes within the recorded data. I recorded each interview, and analyzed each transcript independent of the other collected interviews. Following each individual interview analysis, I then analyzed all transcripts together. This analysis was used to determine potential relationships between each data set.

First, I immersed myself in the data, reviewing the transcripts of the interviews multiple times. This was to ensure that the participant was the focus of the individual analysis. Next, I made notes on the transcripts to begin identifying specific commentary or potential themes within the interviews that began to emerge. Notes were handwritten and consolidated into emergent themes identified in the data interpretation process.

Following the completion of notes reviewed, I compared them to transcripts from the interview to further confirm emergent themes. Descriptive notes made during this component of the analysis were based on common terminology used among participants and included specific framing surrounding the discipline they received. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), this level of analysis helps to further determine potential emergent themes within the collected data.

I used this analysis to identify major themes as well as potential subthemes within the collected data. At this point, I began to interpret the data across data sets to further determine emergent themes. I found connections that resulted from commonly used terminology and context of discussions surrounding the participant's experiences.

Once this portion was completed, I reviewed each interview transcript in relation to the interpreted data set, comparing each interview transcript to one another. This allowed me to identify potential patterns across each participant and the interview data. Two of the interviews were completed at a shorter duration than others, lasting slightly beyond the 40-minute mark. However, due to the succinct answers provided by participants, and comparable experiences among the participants when analyzing data, the shorter duration did not appear to impact the results or data analysis.

Themes Identified

I analyzed these themes to determine potential connections regarding their lived experiences. Overall, the analysis of the data resulted in a total of five primary themes with 12 separate subthemes. The following five major themes emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts. These themes included: (a) coping with significant stress experienced; (b) personal impact of emotional challenges; (c) significant emotional impact of discipline received; (d) changes in professional practice; and (e) avoidance of high conflict work. During data analysis, 12 subthemes emerged in relation to these major themes (see Table 2).

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes

A. Coping With Significant Stress Experienced	B. Personal Impact of Emotional Challenges	C. Significant Emotional Impact of Discipline Received	D. Changes in Professional Practice	E. Avoidance of High Conflict Work
Coping with no Training or Education	Emotional Impact	Timeline of Process	Impact on Career	Refusal to Work with High Conflict Custody Cases
Shared Experiences of Significant Stress	Mental Health Impact	Unethical Practices	Isolation from Professionals	Refusal to Work with Personality Disorders
				Clients Blame Influenced Professional Practice Changes

There were no discrepant findings in the participant's comments, despite each of the participants working in different specialties of practice, such as trauma, veterans, posttraumatic stress disorder, and court ordered clients. Although, each of them had experience working in high conflict custody cases within the field.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

I verified trustworthiness using a variety of methods discussed earlier in this study. These methods included prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, member checking, and reflexive journaling. I was able to demonstrate credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability, which is illustrated in the following section.

Credibility

I was able to demonstrate credibility during the scheduled interviews and subsequent to their completion through multiple methods. This was further demonstrated when participants were able to identify the findings as their own experiences regarding the current topic of receiving discipline from their state licensing board because of their work on high-conflict custody cases through member checking. I provided a transcript of their interview to each of the participants so that they could review and confirm accuracy of their reporting.

Through prolonged engagement, I was able to identify and record potential distortions that may have been displayed due to my position as an individual who has a shared experience to the participant's lived experience. I accomplished this by empathizing with each participant throughout the interview, spending time discussing the reasons behind my current study.

I utilized member checking in this study to determine the accuracy of the participant representation in the findings and interpretation of the data collected. Following the completion of the interviews, I provided each participant with a transcribed version of the interview via email which confirmed that the interview accurately depicted

their views and experiences on the discipline they received because of their work on high-conflict custody cases.

I engaged in reflexive journaling throughout the interview process. This journaling technique helped to document any initial thoughts during the interview sessions, identify any potential patterns that began to arise, and organize the emerging themes as the interviews continued.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of a study can be generalized to other observable contexts. In this regard, transferability is useful because it can make it easier for readers of the study to identify parallels between the study and their lived experiences (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). Through thick description, transferability can be improved or enhanced (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). During interviews, I asked additional clarifying questions to gather more specific examples of experiences from the interviewees. I frequently remained silent during interviews to allow interviewees to provide additional description of experiences they had encountered in practice. In this regard, transferability was enhanced through a clear, concise, and detailed description of the participants lived experience with the impact of their discipline received from their state licensing board.

Dependability

Dependability refers to reliability in quantitative research, which is the stability of the data (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). Moreover, it refers to how dependable the data collected from the interviews and data analysis process are. The key was to be

consistent with all participants, interviews, data collection, and analysis procedures (see Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). A log of each of the above steps was taken, which ensured consistency of the procedures. Doing so enhanced the dependability of the results and the analysis of such. Moreover, audit trails are an in-depth approach to illustrating that the findings of this study are based on the participants' narratives and involve describing the collection and analysis of the data in a transparent manner (see Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). Lastly, I utilized member checking to ensure the accuracy and dependability of the data analysis and interpretation.

Confirmability

Finally, I demonstrated confirmability of the data through the audit trail, which includes records that were generated throughout the study. This includes the raw audio files and transcripts of interviews and was further demonstrated through notes and journaling completed during the study.

Results

At the end of each interview, participants noted the need for this type of study regarding the subject of high conflict custody cases and discipline received from state licensing boards. The overall discussion was one that indicated there is a current need to understand the state licensing board's decisions to discipline a psychologist and its impact on them due to their high conflict work. Each of the participants interviewed uniformly discussed the sensitivity of this subject. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, several potential participants declined to participate in this study.

However, many potential participants and the participants discussed the critical need for this topic to be studied. For instance, each of the participants within the study, thanked me and noted that this subject was important to help improve state licensing board processes and rules surrounding their experience with their state licensing board and the discipline they received. Moreover, many participants noted the need to change legislation and remove discipline from public records after a period of time. The opinion regarding the need for and importance of this study was consistent not only across all participants but potential participants as well.

Participant 1 noted at the end of the interview that he did not have hope until he came across people like this researcher, which changed his mind. Participant 6 shared a similar line of commentary, stating the following: “the reason I agreed to do this because when I heard you were doing something to look at this process, I wanted to participate because if I could help anybody with it, I would be glad to do that.” In addition, participant 4 shared the same sentiment, stating the following: “I’m so proud for you. Thank you....thank you on my behalf and everybody’s else’s behalf that has to go through this bullshit.” Lastly, participant 2 shared the same sentiment of this researcher taking action, stating the following:

You’re at least taking the stance of we’ve got to fix the system as opposed to it’s obviously broken, it is what it is versus you’re going to try and fix it. It’s across the country. I mean, I think every board is.

Moreover, participant 2 shared a similar line of commentary in regard to his interest in this study, stating the following: “I saw the topic. That’s why I wanted to find the time to do it because I have had a lot of experience with them and not been positive.”

In addition to the discussions around the need and importance, participants continued to ask about the results. At the end of two interviews, participants asked what kind of results were being seen at this stage of the interviews. Those who were identified as potential participants have asked to see the completed study and results as soon as possible. This line of inquiry has been consistent across discussions around the topic of state licensing board’s processes when they make a determination of discipline and within the results of this study.

This commentary appeared to be a more minor theme, and I ultimately concluded that it shouldn’t be included as a primary theme for the study but instead deemed that it simply reflected the overall opinion of participants involved in the study as well as those who showed interest in participation. Throughout the interviews as well as prior to interviews, participants and potential participants seemed to demonstrate some level of enthusiasm for the subject. Lines of inquiry were opened among participants regarding the preliminary findings, and commentary regarding the study’s importance were consistent both among those who participated as well as those who had expressed interest in participating. Among those who participated in the interviews, there appeared to be a heightened enthusiasm when discussing the potential future directions. They also uniformly expressed gratitude to the researcher for taking steps to conduct the research.

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the meaning of the experiences of psychologists who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and have received discipline from their state licensing board. These interviews included a total of nine questions developed to respond to two research questions:

RQ1: How do psychologists, who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and who received disciplinary action, describe the coping strategies they used?

RQ2: How do psychologists, who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and who received disciplinary action describe how it influenced change in their professional practice?

In line with the definition of coping strategies described in chapter one, coping strategies were defined as “includes a psychologist’s distress, emotional challenges, experiencing significant stress, and the discipline having an emotional impact that can include “terror, outrage, shock, disbelief, guilt, anger, and embarrassment” (Thomas, 2005, p. 427). Each of the identified themes below stem from this definition and not the colloquial terminology typically associated with coping.

RQ1

RQ1 for this study was: How do psychologists, who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and who received disciplinary action, describe the coping strategies they used?

Theme 1: Coping With Significant Stress Experienced.

When asked questions regarding the participants experience with their state licensing board prior to receiving a board complaint, five participants identified that they had no previous experience. However, participant 1 described his exposure generally as “I have an interesting answer.” Further, participant 1 described his experience of transferring his license from one state to another as difficult from the beginning and that his state licensing board was “abusing and persecuting the professionals.” Some participants noted that they had been aware that psychologists may receive a board complaint and discipline from their state licensing board. For example, all six participants were aware that working with high conflict custody and personality disorders frequently resulted in a board complaint. Participant 6 shared a similar line of commentary in regard to his awareness of the risk involved in working with high conflict individuals, stating the following: “and of course, custody evaluations is one of the highest percentages of board complaints.” Participant 2 also shared a similar awareness of severe psychopathology when working with high conflict individuals, stating the following: “we know that custody work involves high percentage of personality disorders and people who are never going to be happy.”

In response to questions about previous exposure to their state licensing board, participant 2 noted that “prior to doing custody work and a complaint, I had no contact with the board.” Participant 4 provided further confirmation of no contact with her state licensing board, stating, “no interaction with them at all.” However, during the interview with participant 1, he elaborated on his prior experience, stating he had “extensive

experience,” which was adverse. Moreover, participant 1 described his state licensing board as this “system here is virtually ridiculous.”

Subtheme 1.1: Coping With No Training/Education. All six participants indicated that they had not been trained on how to respond to a board complaint filed against their license. Moreover, all six participants declared that they had not received training on how to respond and deal with their state licensing board once a board complaint had been filed against their license. In addition, participant 5 reported he responded to the board complaint on his own, stating the following: “I still had to defend myself with more than one letter.” Across all participants, it was noted that despite their lack of training and exposure, there had been some indirect exposure from research or other professionals in the field. Only one participant could identify with some exposure to dealing with his state licensing board and the need for legal representation when responding to a board complaint. Otherwise, none of the participants had formal training, supervision, or education on how to respond to their state licensing board.

Regarding this particular topic, very little was noted regarding exposure to state licensing boards from participants other than their first board complaint, which required them to navigate their state licensing board on their own. All six participants noted that their response to their board complaint was guided by their own independent experience. Participant 1 elaborated on his personal experience with the board, stating the following: “no limit to what they can push on you or what they can assign to you or what they can litigate with you to defend yourself.” However, all six participants ended up being

represented by legal counsel due to their own experiences ending poorly with their state licensing board.

Participant 2 further adds to this discussion, noting “I actually had to meet with the board with my lawyer.” Participant 1 noted that he decided to “hire [an] attorney” to help in his defense against his state licensing board. Participant 3, 4, and 5 also hired an attorney to aid in their defense. However, all of the participants also discussed the significant expense of this decision. Moreover, they claimed that regardless of hiring legal representation, they received discipline from their state licensing board. When asked about their belief in their innocence, participant 6 stated: I had complete confidence that I would be found innocent because of the way I do things and write reports.” Moreover, participant 6’s discussion around his innocence was further solidified in his mind through his dispute of his licensing boards claims: “I specifically, however, dispute among other things, number five, six, seven, eight, nine, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 19, 21, 22, 23, 26, 27 The legality of this process, the objectivity of the inquiry.”

Subtheme 1.2: Shared Experiences Of Significant Stress. All six participants shared similar experiences in their interactions with their state licensing boards. Each of them shared they received notification of a board complaint through a letter. However, participant 4 noted that she saw a note from the claimant’s attorney drafted in an email that was accidentally sent to her. In addition, each of the participants shared the same level of feeling that their state licensing boards acted in unethical manners, specifically the timeline of their board’s decisions, which was included for further exploration as a subtheme in the following section. Moreover, each of them shared the same intensity of

stress in dealing with their state licensing board. Participant 1 claimed his state licensing board was “hell bent on finding something wrong they would not, did not seem to accept the fact that there could not be anything wrong it was only a matter of time” before the board found something to discipline. Moreover, all six participants claimed to be “terrified” and “petrified” during the state licensing board’s process.

Throughout the interviews, it appeared that each of the participants were impacted in a significant way because of the board complaint and discipline received. Participant 3 shared that she was personally sued by the client who filed a board complaint against her license. Moreover, participant 3 stated the client also took additional action because the client did not get what he wanted, such as he

Was attempting to extort money from me and because I did not give him money and he wanted an official apology, which I didn’t do because I hadn’t done anything wrong so because of those two things he went ahead and filed a board complaint.

Participant 5 shared a similar experience of the claimant causing significant stress to all parties involved in the case, stating that the claimant, “ended up making board complaints against all three of the psychologists involved I know that they went after all three of us for different reasons.”

Participant 6 noted that due to the length of time spent by his state licensing board to make a decision in regard to his case, he “could not afford an attorney any longer because this also led to a divorce.” Moreover, each of the participants described the claimant as “unstable” emotionally. During the interviews, it was clear that each of

the participants shared similar and shared experiences with the discipline process and process with their state licensing board.

Based on the data gathered that aligns with this theme, it appears that the experience of these participants is one of limited exposure to training, supervision, and education to respond to and manage a board complaint. Moreover, it appears that each of the participants were not trained in dealing with discipline from their state licensing board. The topic of discipline received from a state licensing board seems to be consistent among psychologists who work with high conflict individuals within the field of psychology. This is further demonstrated by the experiences of all of participants who attempted to proclaim and defend their innocence against high conflict individuals and people who meet criteria for a personality disorder.

However, the concept of a board complaint potentially being filed against a psychologist itself does not appear to be foreign to the field of practicing psychologists. Rather, the concept of coping with the discipline and the process of becoming disciplined appears to be described through an individual lens. However, although each experience is individualized, it appears the actions of state licensing boards and their process of discipline remains the same. Theme 1 highlights clear deficits in formal training, supervision, and education for psychologists to navigate a board complaint and discipline. Moreover, theme 1 demonstrates that the personal perspectives and shared experiences of psychologists appears to be very similar and an area that does not receive extensive training within doctoral programs for psychologists.

Theme 2: Personal Impact Of Emotional Challenges.

Regarding the impact of the discipline that each participant received, it was clear that each of them had a unique experience. There appeared to be only a slight uniformity in that the participants continually noted their own stressors, changes in their professional practice, and coping strategies to manage the state licensing board process as well as the discipline received. However, the personal impact to each of the participants varied. For example, participant 6 noted that the board complaint process and discipline contributed to the divorce from his partner. Moreover, participant 1 stated that he has not been successful at receiving higher insurance amounts for future board complaints because of the discipline received. In addition, participant 3 described that there was a point when she could no longer afford food or her mortgage payment. Moreover, participant 6 stated, “I lost my retirement, I won’t be retiring.”

Following this theme, participant 5 had the following to say in regard to the personal impact of the discipline he received:

I'm pretty busy at what I do. I ended up waiting until the last minute to do to the CEU's and I had signed up for a course. I was the sole caretaker of my parents who were elderly. The day of the course, which was only two days before the deadline, my father went into the hospital with heart failure. He was in ICU and I just didn't do it. He was actually at the hospital for a week and the deadline passed. I ended up doing it after the deadline.

Participant 5’s license to practice was immediately suspended without the right to practice because he missed the deadline provided by his state licensing board to complete his CEUs, which was part of his sanctions. Participant 1 also shared that his license was

put into suspension mode, however, he was allowed to practice with supervision. Overall, the personal impact of discipline was different for all of the participants because of the claimant and their own personal challenges. However, the emotional impact to each of the participants remained the same.

Subtheme 2.1: Emotional Impact. Personal impacts of discipline received across participants were individualized. However, the emotional impact of receiving discipline from their state licensing board was very uniformed across all participants. Three of the participants noted that they experienced a high level of “paranoia,” which has continued long after their experience with their state licensing board. Participant 1 noted he was “petrified” during the entire process and stated he is “terrified. I still am” after the discipline was received. Moreover, participant 1 reported he was “terrified that someday they’re just going to decide to keep going and keep pushing” for the forfeiture of his license. In addition, participant 2 stated, “you start watching your mail, wondering today, today, am I getting it?” Participant 2 also stated “it’s still been horrific, really horrific” to deal with the emotional impact of receiving discipline. Participant 3 stated,

I feel paranoid that people are going to get angry with me over stuff that has nothing to do with psychology and try to extort money from my family.... It strikes fear in me to think about those things, so yeah, I’m paranoid.

While half of the participants experienced paranoia as a result of their personal experiences with their state licensing board and the discipline they received, all of the participants felt betrayed and not supported by their state licensing boards. Some cited a change needs to be made within state licensing boards to address the lack of support,

while others noted their state licensing boards do not support psychologists “at all.” In each instance, the participants were able to share an individualized version of their experience with their state licensing board. For example, participant 1 stated, “the priority of protecting the public really has to be reaffirmed and rededicated and reorganized.” Whereas participant 2 stated, “it’s frightening because they’re a consumer protection agency they’re very clear, they’re not protecting psychologists. That’s absolutely clear.”

While most of the participant’s experiences included some type of lack of support, each participant described their emotional reactions to the discipline they received. Participant 2 stated, “It’s upsetting. First of all, there isn’t trust in the board...I’ve never found a good way to deal with them.” Moreover, participant 3 reported, “my sense of safety and security flashes before me.” Participant 4 described her experience of lack of support from her state licensing board in this way,

The purpose is not to educate or help a psychologist whatsoever. The purpose of discipline is for it to be on your record for fucking ever. Okay. So that you will forever feel some sort of shame for it. It will come up. You testify in court, it’ll come up. People look you up before they come to see you, it’ll come up. So, it’s designed to humiliate you.

Participant 5 noted, “I did not feel supported. I felt they were out to get me. They were just interested in what I did wrong.” Participant 6 also described his experience of his state licensing board’s support as “it appeared to me that it was a kangaroo court.” Moreover, participant 4 noted “they did exactly what they wanted to do, and I thought what the hell kangaroo court is this?”

The participants also described several other emotions throughout the process of the discipline they received. All of the participants described an intense feeling of shame. Participant 4 offered “it was bullshit. The discipline is basically a public humiliation.” Participant 6 noted, “felt like some public shaming.” Participant 2 also described his experience of feeling shame because his belief is that the state licensing boards “publicly humiliate you on some level.” Participant 3 noted her experience of shame as

I had to go down to [redacted] and meet in front of a room of 200 people. I mean it was completely humiliating.... I was embarrassed, was humiliated in front of all of my peers. I even made the local ... There's an [redacted] newsletter in [state redacted], [redacted] Association. I made the front page.

Moreover, the client alleged that participant 3 struggled with substance abuse. As a result, participant 3 described that as part of her discipline she was ordered to submit to random hair follicle drug testing, where a piece of her hair was cut each time, she submitted a drug test. She further elaborated on this experience, “they cut my hair that was humiliating too because my hairdresser saw it and asked me what happened, and I had to tell her.” Overall, the participants experienced significant emotional impacts to themselves personally. In addition, they also experienced an impact on their mental health.

Subtheme 2.2: Mental Health Impact. Each participant also highlighted varying experiences that impacted their overall mental health. Aligning with the subtheme of emotional impact, the participants noted how their mental health was impacted and changed. Some participants noted that they were prescribed anti-anxiety and anti-

depressants, while others noted symptoms of anxiety and depression. Variables contributed to this inconsistency, which included the participants overall experience with their state licensing board and the level of discipline they received.

In describing their anxiety related to receiving discipline and during their process with their state licensing board, all of the participants noted a high level of fear. For example, participant 1 stated, “it is only a matter of time then they can ding my license and then nobody will use me again” in response to the board making their decision to apply discipline and sanctions against his license. Moreover, participant 1 noted, “so there’s an anxiety over it... you don’t get a response for years, it’s weird, every once in a while, I think is today the day. It never goes away. It just hangs over my head.” In addition, participant 3 stated, “there was two years of anxiety there” while she waited for her state licensing board to impose discipline.

Not only did the participants experience anxiety during the process and after they received their discipline from their state licensing boards, but also long after. For example, participant 5 stated, “I do have a certain level of anxiety when I’m given a potentially difficult patient. I won’t go through that again. It was definitely traumatic.” Moreover, participant 6 echoed the same level of anxiety after he received his discipline as noted by, “I would hate to have to go through something like that again.”

In addition, two of the participants noted they were prescribed medication due to their inability to manage their symptoms of anxiety and depression as a result of the process and discipline received. For example, participant 3 stated, “I had to go on medication for depression and anxiety. I was having panic attacks.” Moreover, participant

3 stated, “this was 2007. Nothing has happened since 2007 and I still cannot read my email without getting anxious.” Participant 6 also stated, “I did end up going on an antidepressant and anxiolytic.”

Overall, across all participants in the study, their emotional stability and mental health were impacted due to the process of their state licensing board and because of the discipline they received. Specifically, all of the participants noted symptoms of anxiety, however, only two participants identified and named that they experienced symptoms of depression. Although, the remaining four participants did not specifically state they experienced depression, each of them identified a symptom of depression, specifically isolation. This subtheme will be discussed later within theme four.

Theme 3: Significant Emotional Impact Of Discipline Received.

A common discussion in the interviews conducted included state licensing board process issues. Despite the varied experiences of the participants, each participant noted clear issues with their state licensing board during the process and after they received their discipline.

Subtheme 3.1: Timeline Of Process. All participants noted that a major contributor to their stress was the process of waiting for a response from their state licensing board. Specifically, each participant noted that the state licensing board’s mandate a response from the psychologists within 30 to 60 days of receipt of their initial board complaint. Moreover, the psychologists identified serious consequences are given if a response is not received. For example, participant 5 stated, “so my license was

suspended” because his attorney did not respond to the state licensing board according to his deadline.

However, the state licensing boards have their own timeline according to all of the participants. Participant 6 noted that he attempted to dispute “the timeline of the investigation and its thoroughness” with his state licensing board. However, no response was received from his state licensing board. Moreover, participant 2 and 3 noted that the state licensing board took approximately three years before they resolved the complaint, which resulted in discipline. Participant 1 shared a similar experience as the “case went on for five years.” Participant 2 stated that “I’ve had other cases in the past that went two years without getting a resolution.” Moreover, participant 2 noted,

For them not to have any obligation to say “okay we have to give you an answer within any period of time” there are actual guidelines that they have to give a determination within a certain number of days, but they just don’t follow it.

Across all of the participants, it was noted that each of them experienced significant frustrations with the length of time their state licensing board took to respond to them. For example, participant 2 stated, “What can they do? Can they call me in now? I barely remember the case. It’s 3.5 years since I met with the board, but the actual case was nine months before that.” Moreover, participant 4 noted that the board was quick to assign discipline, which caused frustrations because she stated, “You think anybody on the board asked me anything about that case. No, no, they don’t care.” As a result, there was an overarching theme of unethical practices within their state licensing board processes.

Subtheme 3.2: Unethical Practices. All of the participants claimed that their state licensing board acted unethically in a number of ways. Although the participants have varied experiences within their state licensing board, each of them noted significant concerns in regard to the actions of their state licensing boards. Participant 6 noted the following concerns with his state licensing board, “the state spent a substantial amount of money including going out and hiring a quote “expert”....which I think is unethical for any expert to look at another report when they have not done an evaluation on the individual themselves.” As a result, participant 6 stated, “the board does not understand the legal process.”

Participant 1 noted that his state licensing board had no limits and assigned discipline and fault without any real evidence. As a result, participant 1 stated the “system is corrupt...a system that’s just mis-organized and mismanaged.” Participant 2 shared a similar experience stating,

Basically, right now the board is uncontrolled and it’s quite scary to get called in front of.... they’re really unchecked though there’s no oversight of the board. They can do whatever they want...it’s been really unethical on their part.... I think there needs to be some oversight because there’s no appeal process. They can do what they want. There should be some protection.

Moreover, participant 3 felt the board

Just stormed forward with charges. They were set on punishing me from day one. They were not objective....no one wanted to listen to an explanation of

what occurred. They were not reasonable people making reasonable decisions that were in places of power on that state board.

In addition, participant 4 stated

The way that it went was, when my attorney got in touch with them after hearing all 10 charges, they were supposed to have combined them into two okay, let go of all the other nonsense that the young attorney had found and it was supposed to be two. But, when I got there, they read out all fricking 10 of them.... everything they said in writing and in person was a lie.

Participant 2 also indicated that there is not an experienced psychologist on the board with high conflict custody cases, which is also unethical because of the significant training that is required to conduct ethical practices with high conflict custody cases.

Overall, the participants in this study identified coping with significant stress, emotional challenges, and a significant emotional impact because of their state licensing board issues. It was clear that each of the participants lacked training and education to manage and respond to their state licensing boards, which caused significant distress. Moreover, each of the participants experienced a high level of stress when responding to their state licensing boards. For instance, the participants coped with their initial board complaint by defending themselves. The participants experienced significant paranoia and anxiety, which significantly impacted their overall mental health. In addition, the participants discussed concerns and discrepancies within the time limit that the board imposes on psychologists compared to their own timelines. In addition, it is clear that there are significant issues within the state licensing board's ability to respond to a board

complaint within a reasonable time frame, which caused significant distress and emotional challenges for the participants. For instance, the participants within this study waited two to five years for the conclusion of their board complaint. As a result, the participants experienced significant paranoia, anxiety, and fear waiting for a response. Moreover, the participants identified several unethical practices of their state licensing board processes, which caused a significant emotional response of paranoia and fear. The coping strategies that were found within this study were responding to the board independently, significant paranoia and anxiety, and the identification of state licensing board issues. These coping strategies led to psychologists within this study to make changes in their professional practice because of their adverse experience with their state licensing boards.

RQ2

RQ2 for this study was: How do psychologists, who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and who received disciplinary action describe how it influenced change in their professional practice?

Theme 4: Changes In Professional Practice.

A common discussion in the interviews conducted included how the discipline the participants received impacted their professional practice. Despite the varied experiences and practices of the participants, each participant noted a clear impact on their professional practice because of the process with their state licensing board and the discipline they received as a result.

Subtheme 4.1: Impact On Career. A critical subtheme identified in the interviews was that during and after the participants experiences with their state licensing board, participants were impacted which caused them to make changes accordingly within their professional practice. One participant noted that he increased his rates because “when I get grieved, I basically start looking at when I can raise my rates” to compensate for the time and money spent defending the allegations. Participant 2 shared a similar experience stating,

You have to build that into your fee, or at least I do. The reason it is so much per hour is because you have to figure at some point there will be a board complaint and that’s going to take many, many hours of your time.

One participant noted she was removed from three insurance panels as a result of the discipline she received, which caused her to apply for other insurance panels. As a result, she had to work more hours because the new insurance panels she secured paid less. In addition, participant 1 described many attempts to increase his liability insurance and being denied because of the discipline he received. Participant 3 stated, “I had to resign my position as the continuing education chair, it’s shocking isn’t it?” Participant 5 noted, “I was working on a contract to be a speaker on a CEU course on cruises and then they saw that my license was suspended, they cancelled it” As a result, participant 5 stated the following, “I don’t put myself out there anymore because I’m not going to go through with that....they’ll see a suspended license. What’s the point?” Participant 4 also shared that she would not be a member of the American Psychological Association if she

did not have to purchase their insurance through them. Conversely, participant 5 stated that his local state association “won’t accept me.”

Moreover, participant 3 described several job opportunities that were lost as a result of the discipline received, which caused her to stay in private practice longer than she had planned. Moreover, participant 5 stated, “I’ve had several opportunities, career opportunities that got squashed because they saw that I have a suspension on my record.” Participant 6 shared a similar experience stating, “I was the consulting psychologist on the child protection team for [redacted] I did that for 15 years, I had to end that because of this.” Further, he noted, “I did lose something I loved...it’s something that was important to me.”

Participant 5 described that he lost several clients during the three months that his license was suspended. Specifically, he stated, “It was terrible, I lost a good part of my practice. I had to rebuild it...the loss of income was not easy.” Participant 6 also shared a similar experience of loss of money. For example, he noted, “I lost my retirement, I won’t be retiring” because of the money spent on the defense. Lastly, one participant contemplated their career, stating, “I’m keeping my license. I was tempted to; I just want to get rid of it.” Moreover, participant 4 shared a similar experience, stating, “like I was glad to be done with that bullshit, and I wondered whether or not I still wanted to be a psychologist.” In addition to the impact on their career and future opportunities, many of the participants also shared a similar experience of withdrawing from the field due to the discipline they received.

Subtheme 4.2: Isolation From Professionals. All of the participants noted a significant change in their professional network. For example, each of them described how they became more self-sufficient and did not engage or seek support from other psychologists. For example, participant 4 stated, “I don’t have friendships with psychologists. I don’t reach out for help. I don’t reveal anything about who I am and what I’m doing, maybe that’s a side effect” of the discipline received. In addition, participant 5 stated, “I’ve kind of withdrawn professionally” from the field of psychology.

Participant 1 noted that he had to advocate for himself, which he has learned to do because of the difficulty during the process and after he received discipline from his state licensing board. As a result, participant 1 noted, “I don’t talk to my friends about it... or my kids.” Participant 3 shared a similar experience stating that “I didn’t feel like talking to people or going out anywhere, so I just stayed home like a hermit.” Participant 5 explained that he isolated himself, stating, “I just stick it into a drawer and throw myself into my work.” Participant 6 shared a similar experience, stating, “I tried to keep myself busy with work.” Participant 4 stated, “I don’t rely on another human being to provide me with any supportive guidance or input...I just saw too much fraud, too much contempt, too much lack of concern for the professionals out there.” This theme highlights the significant impact that discipline has had on a psychologist’s professional network and support system.

Theme 5: Avoidance Of High-Conflict Work.

A consistent theme among psychologists interviewed was that of a high conflict work environment. Participants included in this study included clinic-based providers. In

each interview, participants noted a high level of stress relating to their work with high-conflict clients. Each participant noted a high level of passion for their work as well and disappointment in no longer working with high conflict clients due to the discipline they received.

All of the participants discussed the high likelihood of a board complaint if they continued to work with this population. Participant 1 noted that his work has required him to think about the high risk of a board complaint. As a result, he attempted to reduce his risk when writing reports to the courts or on behalf of high conflict clients. Moreover, participant 2 explained that high conflict work has set “up a system so that only the wealthy narcissist can have” custody of their children. Further, he noted that attorneys on custody cases have the expectation that psychologists can make custody determinations, which is unethical and adds pressure on the psychologist. All of the participants in this study noted challenges with this population, specifically, the high conflict, the accusations, the blame from parents, and the state licensing board’s process and decision making in regard to their discipline.

Based on the experiences of the participants in this study, there appears to be some anecdotal evidence of significant consequences related to high conflict work with clients. Specifically, it was clear that each of the participants made a decision to no longer work with high conflict clients based on their experiences with their state licensing boards and the discipline received. One participant noted that they are changing their career path, specifically, “I’m trying to do more consulting and evaluation prep work...any chances of a grievance are slim.” Moreover, participant 1 noted, “I’m

thinking about, well, how can I do preparation for people and consulting? And, how can I end up just doing real estate really, instead of psychology.”

Participant 2 shared a similar experience, stating the following, “I’ll do evaluation and risk assessment but I’m not going to do custody....it’s interesting that it has pushed me out of doing custody work...in some ways the system is set up so that it pushed me out.” In addition, participant 4 noted, “I don’t do custody evaluations anymore...nasty people, nasty, nasty people who take an act of kindness and try to be hurtful.” Participant 5 also stated “absolutely not involved in that at all” when asked if he is still practicing and working with high conflict clients. Participant 3 stated the following,

I won’t take borderline patients on; I won’t treat them. I won’t do DBT.... if anyone gets upset, I almost automatically discharge them and transfer them to a different psychologist.... I just can’t handle the conflict and the anxiety around these kinds of situations. Bipolar, I transfer those kinds of patients. I just say that I can’t. I can’t deal with that kind of intensity, paranoia, anger being directed at me.

Participant 6 also noted that he avoids high conflict cases. Specifically, he stated, “I mean, certainly I was not going to take any high-conflict custody cases.”

It was clear that in the discussion of high conflict clients, commentary and context around the board and the difficulty level of working with high conflict clients emerged. Specifically, none of the participants in this study continued their work with high conflict clients, especially custody cases. However, it was interesting that personality disorders were also discussed as a reason for stopping their work with this population. Lastly, it is notable that all of the psychologists within this study talked about

the importance and need for psychologists to work with high conflict clients. Moreover, they noted that because of the high rate of board complaints filed against their license it results in removing themselves from working with this population.

Subtheme 5.1: Refusal To Work With High-Conflict Custody Cases. Some participants noted that, in their previous work, a major contributor to stress in the workplace was working with high conflict custody cases. Dangerous clients that place psychologists in high-risk situations are often common in practice, and psychologists noted struggles with this particular population directly. This appears to be a theme not only among participants, but among the research within the field itself. Some effects of working with clients at this level include a high percentage of board complaints filed against their license, pressure from attorneys and judges, loss of sleep, bias of state licensing boards, high degrees of personality disorders within this population, diminished hope for the practitioner, etc. These effects were discussed but warrant further research.

Participant 2 specifically notes the challenges of working with intense clients and the types of clients receiving his services. The discussion below alludes to working with high conflict clients who may retaliate based on the outcome of the psychologist's work:

They'll say I don't like men, or I don't like women or something, but something that doesn't make any sense. You've got certain people who are never going to take responsibility who are then of course going to make a compliant because how could I have not found them to be the primary parent.

Participant 1 also noted that high conflict custody cases present as people who refuse to sign paperwork and are “hostile and uncooperative and not in good faith right off the bat.” Moreover, participant 4 noted that the children do not benefit with parents who do not act in good faith. For example, she stated, “now, she [the child] didn’t benefit because I was punished. She benefited because of what I taught the parents before the attorney got involved.”

Regarding high conflict custody cases where one parent does not receive the result they hoped for, one participant noted his experience. Specifically, participant 5 stated,

She was not willing to compromise, quickly became very adversarial. Very quickly she became very destabilized and started getting paranoid about me. Started making very inflammatory allegations about him having a gay affair...and abusing the children. It got out of control very quickly. They filed for divorce...the wife’s attorney went on a war path against the two psychologists that did the evaluation, and me.

Moreover, participant 6 described high conflict custody cases as “nasty and take a long time and not worth it.” Furthermore, he noted the following, “custody evaluations are one of the highest percentages of board complaints. I told people, you’re being set up for a board complaint you’re going to get a complaint, there’s no question about it.” This theme highlights the intensity in dealing with clients who are involved in a high conflict custody case. This further aligns with the overall issue of a high likelihood of having a board complaint filed against a psychologist’s license.

Subtheme 5.2: Refusal To Work With Personality Disorders. For participants who have worked with high conflict clients in the past, personality disorders were identified as a contributing factor to receiving a board complaint that led to discipline. This appears to be a theme not only among participants, but among the research within the field itself. All of the participants identified borderline personality disorder and narcissistic personality disorder as the two most common that contributed to their high conflict work. As a result, all of the participants now avoid working with clients who present with symptoms of personality disorders or official diagnoses of such.

Participant 2 indicated that high conflict work has a strong correlation with personality disorders. For example, he noted, “if it reaches the level of custody evaluation, there’s a higher probability of a personality disorder. It is narcissism and people who basically don’t take any responsibility, low self-control kinds of things.” Moreover, participant 2 reiterated during his interview the high probability of personality disorders, stating, “we know that custody work involves high percentages of personality disorders and people who are never going to be happy.” Moreover, participant 5 stated, “she was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, paranoia” and as a result, the judge gave full custody of the children to the father.

Participant 5 also explained that five years after he received discipline, he worked with another client with a personality disorder, he reported the events as follows:

I just remember that maybe five years later, something else happened with a different outcome, thank god.... a very disturbed borderline, bipolar patient...she convinced herself that we were having an affair. She was

delusional. She happened to be, believe it or not, studying to be a therapist. She reported me to the board for patient abandonment and inappropriate relationships which obviously was, as you can imagine what that was like, it was terribly traumatizing. He [the husband] actually contacted the board and wrote them a letter letting them know how sick she was and that she had a pattern with other therapists. So, it didn't go anywhere. Yep. That was very traumatizing. She was really smart and convincing, but the husband saved my neck.

Overall, the participants described that the clients that filed a board complaint against their license often included highly aggressive individuals. Moreover, they indicated that these individuals are dangerous to psychologists because they are “convincing” and can easily place the psychologist’s career in danger. Thus, according to the participants within this study, clients who present with symptoms or are officially diagnosed with a personality disorder, have a high likelihood of leading to a filed board complaint against a psychologist license and discipline from their state licensing board. As a result, the participants in this study, avoid working with high conflict clients, including custody cases and individuals who are diagnosed or present with a personality disorder. The participants noted difficulty in this decision because they enjoyed working with higher conflict individuals. Moreover, several participants stated they lost significant income from no longer taking high conflict custody cases. However, all of the participants described improved mental health due to the decision to no longer work with high conflict clients.

Subtheme 5.3: Clients Blame Influenced Professional Practice Changes.

During the interviews, it was clear that each participant had a unique experience with their clients and state licensing boards, as noted previously. Within this study, it is noted that the participants included psychologists providing services in the client's home, community, and private practice-based settings. Each interview highlighted unique and individualized experiences with clients, however, similar experiences in clients blaming them for the outcome not ending in their favor occurred.

This varied experience is further highlighted in discussions around what was included in their board complaint. Participant 1 notes the "complaint is anonymous with obscene and profane terms and had to be defended." Furthermore, he found out that it was not the client that filed a board complaint, it was the client's partner. One participant explained that clients can accuse and allege anything against the psychologist, which results in the psychologist defending themselves. Participant 1 stated that the partner of the client decided that he "need to be punished" because the client did not receive the outcome they attempted to pursue.

Moreover, participant 4 stated, "blame, needed to blame somebody" when she talked about the client filing a board complaint against her license. Participant 5 explained that the client that filed a board complaint against his license also went after every professional on the case, alleging a variety of offenses that each of them committed. Participant 6 shared a similar experience, stating that "the mother filed suits against the judge, filed appeals.... filed complaints against all the attorneys, everyone got nothing except me."

While each psychologist described a different client experience, they all noted their belief in the client needing someone to blame for the unfavorable outcome. Most participants noted rigors and expectations related to their clients. Specifically, clients expect to receive a favorable outcome and if this does not occur, there is a high probability of a board complaint being filed against a psychologist's license. Moreover, due to the psychologist's experiences with their state licensing boards, within this study, there is a high probability of discipline resulting from work with high conflict clients.

Overall, the psychologists within this study noted significant changes in their professional practice due to the discipline they received from their work with high conflict clients. Moreover, they discussed the difficulty of their decision to avoid high conflict and clients with personality disorders and their enjoyment of working with custody cases. They also explained that this decision resulted in a loss of income for them. It is clear from this research that psychologists who work with high conflict custody cases have a high likelihood of receiving a board complaint and subsequent discipline, which results in avoidance of working with high conflict custody cases and high conflict clients.

Summary

This study included a total of six current licensed psychologists. I gathered no information regarding these participants prior to their participation in the study to avoid potentially skewing the results and to prevent biases. These participants were recruited through their state licensing boards via a group email. After I received consent from the participants, I completed semistructured interviews via video.

Multiple themes emerged during the interviews and subsequent data analysis. These psychologists seemed to have encountered a variety of experiences regarding their work with high conflict clients that include themes, such as (a) coping with significant stress experienced; (b) personal impact of emotional challenges; (c) significant emotional impact of discipline received; (d) changes in professional practice; and (e) avoidance of high conflict work. Based on the data collected for this study, there appears to be a few major findings regarding board process issues, high conflict clients, and changes in a psychologist's professional practice. Overall, there appears to be no formal training in work with high conflict clients, the process of dealing with a board complaint, and how to manage personal and professional experiences due to discipline received. Exposure to discipline and state licensing boards appears to be of a similar nature, where the experiences were found as devastating, career changing, and resulted in higher negative symptoms of mental health.

Other findings include information regarding psychologist's overall experience. Experiences with their state licensing boards, managing their emotions, their roles that led to a board complaint, and their shared experiences. Similarly, exposure to the high conflict client populations provided further insight to the complex and variable nature of high conflict custody work. With each participant having worked with a high conflict client in a different capacity, their experiences with their state licensing boards and high conflict clients, specifically with a personality disorder, seems to be one that warrants further exploration.

In addition to the above findings, there is some anecdotal evidence of an impact on the professional regarding future practices. Noted during the interviews, psychologists changed career paths due to their experiences. Moreover, the participants found ways of coping with the disciplined they received. For some they were able to make changes to their professional practice, which helped to reduce their fear of another board complaint. For some they identified poor coping skills that had an impact on their professional network and overall income. There was a clear emphasis on the importance of the subject among participants in the study. Throughout each interview and among those who were interested in participating, there were regular comments regarding the subject and the importance in the field as well as ongoing inquiry regarding the findings.

In Chapter 5, I will provide further discussion and interpretation of the results of this study, as well as limitations and potential future research in this area. In addition, I also provide discussion of some of the implications of social change and final conclusions for this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the meaning of the experiences of psychologists who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and have received discipline from their state licensing board. I wanted to understand how psychologists described their coping strategies to receiving disciplinary action and how that changed their professional practice. To gain this understanding, I targeted doctoral level licensed psychologists who have or currently are working with high conflict custody cases within their practice. The results of this study provide a unique understanding of a psychologist's experience with their state licensing board, discipline received, and how their coping skills and changes in their professional practice are discussed and perceived.

The six participants in the study were all actively practicing in some capacity of mental health work, and each demonstrated the variability of work in the field as well as common stressors regarding their experience with their state licensing board and the discipline they received. In my research, I identified five main themes and 12 distinct subthemes related to participants' lived experiences. In this chapter, I will provide a summary of the results, further discuss the limitations of the study, provide additional recommendations for future research, and discuss potential social implications.

Overview

Psychologists are licensed and governed by state licensing boards designed to protect the public. A board complaint can be filed against their license if a client believes

the psychologist has committed misconduct or as a means for a client to validate their feelings (Bucky & Callan, 2014). As of January 1, 2020, there were 6,664 board complaints filed against psychologists collected from 50 psychology boards in the United States (Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards, 2019). Since the inception of state licensing boards governing the practice of psychologists, research has focused on the number and categories of complaints filed against all psychologists (Wilkinson et al., 2019). As research has continued to develop, the focus has shifted to discipline received and specialties of psychologists, such as those who work with high conflict custody cases (Saini et al., 2012). Today, there has been an increased demand for psychologists to work on high conflict custody cases, as well as an increase in board complaints being filed against their license (Francis et al., 2018).

Prior to this study, research on the coping strategies and changes in a psychologist's professional practice due to discipline received from board complaints has not been the focus of research. Research has focused on the ethical practices of psychologists (Horn et al., 2019). However, exposure to high conflict custody cases brings worry and fear of having a board complaint filed against their license despite the increased demand for psychologists to work with high conflict custody cases (Bow & Martindale, 2009; Wilkinson et al., 2019). After reviewing the current research, I noted that there are clear gaps that fail to identify the coping strategies and changes in professional practices of psychologists who have been disciplined and work with high conflict custody cases (Saini et al., 2012; Wilkinson et al., 2019). In this study, I focused on those gaps in the research to explore and understand the experiences of psychologists

who have been disciplined and have worked with high conflict custody cases. Specifically, I focused on a psychologist's coping strategies and changes in their professional practice after they had received discipline from their state licensing board.

Interpretation of the Findings

The research questions for this study were:

RQ1: How do psychologists, who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and who received disciplinary action, describe the coping strategies they used?

RQ2: How do psychologists, who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and who received disciplinary action describe how it influenced change in their professional practice?

Throughout the interview processes, I tried to gather and organize the lived experience of the psychologist, including the coping strategies they used and how it influenced change in their professional practice. Previous research indicated among psychologists, coping strategies often included emotions they experienced, such as anxiety, depression, mistrust, sleep issues, and anger (Bow et al., 2010; Bricklin et al., 2003; Bucky & Callan, 2014; Thomas, 2005; Van Horne, 2004; Wilkinson et al., 2019). The results of this research are no different in that psychologists within this study experienced anxiety, depression, mistrust, sleep issues, and anger. This directly aligns with trends within the current body of literature and demonstrates a consistent perspective on board complaints and subsequent discipline received among psychologists in regard to their work with high conflict clients.

The first research question, I sought to answer what coping strategies were used with psychologists who work with high conflict custody cases. In line with the first theme, coping with significant stress experienced, the interviews revealed overall system issues with training and significant stress experienced as a result. The clearest analysis of the data provided is that psychologists may unknowingly participate in coping strategies that have both positive and negative results. It should be noted that Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory indicated that people can have positive and negative coping skills, which was found within the current study. In addition, it appears that psychologists are lacking an awareness that these coping strategies are in response to their significant distress and lack of training in responding to a board complaint

This highlights the gap in the research in discipline received despite all the research on board complaints received. Research supports that psychologists did not receive any formal training in working with high conflict custody cases; rather, they taught themselves (Bow & Martindale, 2009). Francis et al. (2018) found that many psychologists who were not professionally competent to work with high-conflict custody cases, did so, nonetheless. This body of research provides the other perspective regarding high conflict custody as well as the overall system issues within state licensing boards. Aligning with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping, these studies add support to the domain of the cognitive processes that contribute to the appraisal of a stressor and ultimately the coping strategies that are created and used to manage the stressor.

The first theme that I identified illustrated that the participants in this study shared similar experiences of significant stress. For instance, participants indicated several coping strategies consistently. With psychologists lacking formal training in the process of board complaints and state licensing boards, they noted they did not know how to respond to the board complaint. As a result, they independently and directly dealt with their state licensing board, which resulted in unfavorable conclusions. Moreover, they noted significant emotional dysregulation when they received the discipline, which is consistent with the current literature. In addition, most of the participants noted experiencing significant distress, including paranoia well after their discipline was received. The distress experienced aligns with the current body of literature on the topic of board complaints filed while working with high conflict clients (Bow et al., 2010; Bricklin et al., 2003; Bucky & Callan, 2014; Thomas, 2005; Van Horne, 2004; Wilkinson et al., 2019).

In addition, psychologists are actively practicing coping strategies while dealing with the aftermath of the discipline received. However, there has not been formal training or education on the concept (Bow et al., 2010; Bricklin et al., 2003; Bucky & Callan, 2014; Thomas, 2005; Van Horne, 2004; Wilkinson et al., 2019). It is unclear what this suggests in terms of learning among licensed practitioners; however, there is a clear indication that psychologists actively participate in some capacity of coping strategies. The coping strategies of psychologists within this study does not contradict the literature as there is no formal literature on training among psychologists within graduate programs in how to manage and deal with a board complaint and subsequent discipline received.

Rather, this indicates that the lack of training is occurring presently among psychologists and has gone unnoticed by researchers.

Understanding the second theme of personal impact of emotional challenges specifically, the emotional and mental health impact of psychologists and the implications regarding these concepts are paramount in helping to understand how the psychologist can improve their experience when they respond to a board complaint and subsequently prevent more problematic outcomes among those practicing with high conflict clients. Some participants noted they were prescribed antianxiety and antidepressant medications, while others noted they poured themselves into their work and avoided dealing with their discipline. Discussion regarding their experiences seemed to illustrate that psychologists are susceptible to significant trauma variables when they have received discipline, which appeared to impact them long after their discipline was received.

What makes these findings significant is that there was previously little understanding on the coping strategies within the realm of psychologists who work with high conflict clients. Moreover, research has focused on psychologists who work with high-conflict custody cases and the fact that they experience considerable distress when receiving and defending a board complaint that is filed (Bow et al., 2010; Bricklin et al., 2003; Bucky & Callan, 2014; Thomas, 2005; Van Horne, 2004; Wilkinson et al., 2019). The research findings indicate that psychologists share the experience of distress although it appears to be much more significant after they receive discipline. Furthermore, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified coping strategies of individuals who

have experienced stress, such as mental health symptoms. Psychologists may have previously experienced mental health symptoms or the discipline they received may have triggered these symptoms. In sum, psychologists may share similar distress in receiving board complaints, though the findings of this study suggest their distress is more significant after they receive discipline from their state licensing board.

Consistent with the third theme of psychologists within this study who experienced significant emotional impact of discipline received, findings specific to their state licensing boards emerged. Exposure to high conflict clients, board complaints, and subsequent discipline were individualized across participants, which also aligned with the current body of literature regarding how psychologists defend themselves against a board complaint (Bow et al., 2010; Bricklin et al., 2003; Bucky & Callan, 2014; Thomas, 2005; Van Horne, 2004; Wilkinson et al., 2019).

This variability in experience also followed the psychologist's operational definitions of distress they experienced, which did not align with the current body of literature. The current body of literature does not specifically define distress according to populations served within the field of psychology, thus creating a more accurate definition when working with high conflict clients, specifically custody cases is needed. While the varying experiences of defending against a board complaint aligned with the trend in the literature, the outcome of a board complaint does not align with a psychologist's training, education, or the ethical practices of all psychologists including those serving on state licensing boards. For example, participants often described their disdain for the lack of requirements to which state licensing boards are required to adhere

insofar as those requirements pertain toward arriving at a speedy conclusion. Overall, a clear and concise definition could not be gleaned from the participants, but a general definition of distress describing a psychologist's response to discipline received was established as a result of the interviews.

Much of the discussion regarding discipline received took place around the processes of state licensing boards and their unethical practices. While this did not fall within the scope of the research questions directly, the processes of state licensing boards and their perceived unethical practices provide a clearer picture of the lived experience of the psychologist. Extensive discussion revolved around perceived unethical practices of the timeline to respond to board complaints and the lack of compliance state licensing boards practiced according to their own standards. Although the disdain for state licensing boards does align with the current body of literature, the findings of unethical timelines and practices do not align with the literature. Coy et al. (2016) found that psychologists experience significant disdain toward their state licensing boards, however, no further research on the timeline or ethical practices of state licensing boards was provided.

Extensive discussion centered around the sanctions received and the participant's opinion of the extreme response from their state licensing board. This finding is significant, appears to be new to the literature and should be further explored. Lastly, extensive focus was placed on state licensing boards lack of support toward the psychologists and the lack of protection for psychologists. Although Coy et al.'s (2016) study found that the state licensing boards were irrelevant, expensive, and unhelpful as it

relates to complaints being filed against a license; however, the study did not focus on state licensing boards as a support system to psychologists. Moreover, Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) work on stress responses and coping strategies that people use lends itself to further conceptualization of the human behavior of state licensing board members and, in turn, their experiences.

With the second research question, I sought to answer what changes in professional practice occurred after discipline was received with psychologists who work with high conflict custody cases. Consistent with the fourth theme of changes in professional practice, participants indicated they made many changes in their professional practice, such as avoiding future work with high conflict custody cases as well as clients who present with symptoms of a personality disorder. Clients presenting with personality disorders is also confirmed in the literature as one of the reasons that individuals file board complaints, especially within the high conflict custody population (Bow et al., 2010). While there are many parallels discussed here in regard to the current body of literature, there are some stark differences in the experiences of psychologists who received discipline due to their work with high conflict clients. Two of the psychologists had their license suspended, which had a significant impact on their ability to financially provide for themselves and their families. Although this aligns with the current body of literature of significant distress (Bow et al., 2010; Bricklin et al., 2003; Bucky & Callan, 2014; Thomas, 2005; Van Horne, 2004; & Wilkinson et al.'s, 2019), it does not align with the specific changes in professional practice that are made as a result of discipline received.

In addition, all of the psychologists have their discipline published for the remainder of their career with no time limit on the removal, which also has significant ramifications for future career opportunities. For example, participants noted many lost employment opportunities as a result of the discipline they received. These findings also do not align with the current body of literature because no literature about the impact of published discipline has been studied.

The findings of the changes within the participant's professional practice are crucial as they identify links between the psychologist's reactions to the discipline received and what happened afterwards. In addition, vicarious traumatization may have occurred, but it is more likely that the participants experienced direct traumatization as a result of the exposure to discipline and their state licensing board's processes. This does not align with the current body of literature because distress is used to describe a psychologist's experience in the previous literature, not trauma.

The experience of psychologists may vary based on their specific client and the sanctions received; however, the majority of psychologists who work with high conflict clients are highly exposed to clients who require services either through independent licensed professionals or through the court system. This directly results in a high likelihood that the licensed professional will receive a board complaint and subsequent discipline as evidenced in the current body of literature. Overall, discrepancies were found within this study regarding how psychologists managed their professional practices and the aftermath of their trauma responses that resulted from their discipline. The psychologists in this study demonstrated their cognitive appraisal, which included past

experiences, their current stressors, and the appraisal of the consequences they received and experienced as a result of their discipline, which closely aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory.

Consistent with the final theme of avoidance of high conflict work, the participants in this study made significant adjustments in terms of whom they chose to serve as a result of the discipline received. However, each of the psychologists noted that they actively engaged in some kind of coping strategy and change in their professional practice without prior training, which was consistent with some descriptions found in the literature. This was further highlighted when discussing some of the current research regarding the high percentage of board complaints filed against a psychologist's license because of their work with high conflict custody cases and high conflict clients. Of the six participants, none of them were actively practicing with high conflict custody or high conflict clients. While state licensing boards, attorneys, training, and education during graduate schools may not explicitly direct psychologists to practice in specific areas within the field of psychology, they do focus actively on the ethical practices of psychologists. According to the current body of literature, psychologists are expected to practice ethically and engage in continuing education and research (Horn et al., 2019). However, exposure to high conflict custody cases brings worry and fear of having a board complaint filed against their license despite the increased demand for psychologists to work with high conflict custody cases (Bow & Martindale, 2009; Wilkinson et al., 2019). In addition, psychologists are expected to practice ethically; however, it is clear from this current study that none of the psychologists were properly trained to manage a

board complaint and may have made errors, which may have led to their sanctions. Further research on the impact of psychologist's refusal to work with high conflict custody cases would be necessary to identify specific training and/or legislative change to protect psychologists to increase the availability with high conflict custody cases.

During the literature review in Chapter 2 and the summary discussed in this chapter, I provide context for the results of the study. Of the six participants, no participant had formal training regarding dealing with high conflict custody cases or high conflict clients and subsequent discipline received. When asked questions about their previous experience, five participants noted that they had no previous experience with their state licensing board. However, participant 1 noted an adverse experience when he transferred his license from one state to another. In addition, none of the participants noted they had formal training in managing the discipline they received. Some commented that they had hired attorneys, defended themselves, were prescribed medications, and refused to work with custody cases in their future practice. This further demonstrated that the experience was fairly alien to the psychologists. This is consistent with the state licensing board research in regard to psychologist's who receive a board complaint, which focused on their feelings toward their licensing board (Coy et al., 2016).

Coping strategies and changes in professional practice as concepts in the field of psychology is in its infancy and has not been a focus of psychologists who have received discipline from their state licensing boards due to their work with high conflict custody cases. The concept has been studied, as evidenced by Coy et al. (2016) and Van Horne

(2004), however, the findings here do not align with that previous research. The coping strategies and changes in professional practice found within this current study are likely due to differences in the varying experiences of psychologists who dealt with their state licensing board's processes and some of the discrepancies in their decision-making process. Coy et al.'s (2016) study focused on the state licensing boards as irrelevant, expensive, and unhelpful as it relates to complaints being filed against a license. In the current study, this research somewhat aligns with the experiences of the participants. However, the Van Horne (2004) study focused on the concept of changes in professional performance and not on changes in a psychologist's professional practice. Although this study aligns with the current research in lower confidence among psychologists, it does not identify a deeper understanding and identification of what specifically changed for psychologists. In the current study, I identified specific changes in professional practices. The basis of these decisions was fear of future retaliation from high conflict clients as well as the decision-making processes of their state licensing boards. What I discovered in this research was that state licensing boards have not been studied and the reasons for a psychologist's decision to make changes in their professional practice. Instead, what was found is that psychologists made decisions based on fear and because of their state licensing board's extreme power to impose sanctions on their license and ability to practice.

In sum, the results from the interviews conducted in this study indicate that psychologists employ a variety of coping strategies and make changes to their professional practice, but there is no formal research on their experiences with their state

licensing boards, specifically the board's perceived unethical practices. It is likely that psychologists have independently trained themselves to deal and manage a board complaint and subsequent discipline. However, no specific data was identified specific to a psychologist's independent training of themselves during this current study. There seems to be some recognition as to the impact of discipline received, but again, this appears to come less from a formal training lens and more from their viewpoint in relation to discipline received. Psychologists continue to practice; however, they no longer work with high conflict clients, which is a concern for the field and future clients who are in need of psychological services. Moreover, it is clear that there is not sufficient training for psychologists to help them manage and cope with their trauma responses after they receive discipline from their state licensing board.

The psychologists in this study demonstrated their cognitive appraisal, which included past experiences, their current stressors, and the appraisal of the consequences they received and experienced as a result of their discipline, which closely aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory. Moreover, the psychologist's appraised their significant distress as the result of their state licensing board's unethical practices. The psychologists identified that their distress was increased due to a lack of timeline requirements from their state licensing board and applying unnecessary discipline as a result of their work with high conflict clients. Moreover, the psychologists indicated that their coping strategies occurred during the process and continued long after they received their discipline. For example, they identified paranoia as a new appraisal of current stressors within their daily practices. In addition, participants noted some challenges

regarding new clients and quickly referring them if they presented as high conflict clients. This is the result of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory because psychologists are using their cognitive and emotional appraisal process to create new coping skills.

Ultimately, it was discovered that psychologists do engage in specific coping strategies and changed their professional practices due to the discipline they received. Moreover, it is clear that psychologists firmly believe their state licensing boards acted unethically. The participants also identified that the outcome could be different if state licensing boards protected and supported psychologists who work with high conflict custody cases and clients who are diagnosed with a personality disorder. Lastly, it was discovered there are clear deficits in state licensing board's processes and decision-making processes to protect psychologists who choose to work with high conflict custody or clients with personality disorders.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations can be attributed to this study due to the subjective nature of the topic of discipline received from state licensing boards. Concepts like reliability and validity, which are found within quantitative research, limit the potential for qualitative results (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). This limitation also includes concerns with generalizability, which would be less of a concern in a quantitative study. With a focus on trustworthiness, however, the qualitative nature of this study can be considered reliable. The themes found within this study may be transferable, which helps to address issues with generalizability. While this may not address larger generalized claims of the

consistency of the research, this does provide those reading the study to identify potential connections to the themes and subthemes regarding their own lived experience.

A second limitation may exist regarding the demographics of the participants in the study. Of the six participants, four identified as male and two identified as female. They spanned in age between 30 and 69 years old and reported practicing between 17-35 years. However, four of the six participants fell within the 60-69 age bracket. In addition, five of the six participants actively practice on the east coast, while only one practices on the west coast. While saturation was reached at six participants, there may be unique lived experiences among younger psychologists, or those who live in the Midwest or south within the United States. It is unknown whether differing demographics would expose unique lived experiences within the field.

Access to participants is another limitation in this study. It was clear to this researcher that this topic was a sensitive one. As a result, several psychologists responded to the initial invitation with negativity. For example, several potential participants did not believe this was an approved study through the IRB. I believe that psychologists did not want to participate in the study due to being potentially triggered from their disciplinary experience. Moreover, according to Kirkland and Kirkland (2001), there is a small percentage of psychologists who actually receive disciplinary action; therefore, narrowing the access to psychologists who have worked or currently work with high-conflict custody cases proved to be difficult as well. Given this limitation the participants in the current study may have been biased and filtered their own views, which means they may have altered their experiences.

An additional limitation to the study could be the length of interviews conducted. Original interview times were slated between 60 minutes long, but the interviews conducted here lasted between 30-45 minutes consistently. With longer interviews, more information could be gathered regarding the lived experience of these psychologists. However, due to the sensitivity of the topic, it is possible that longer interviews may also become tedious and limit participant responses.

Over the course of each interview, I as the researcher attempted to remain unbiased, however, some biases were inevitable. My own potential bias existed because I have had two board complaints filed against me because of high-conflict custody cases and one that resulted in discipline. Some biases existed due to learning the history and perspectives of the participants because of the shared experience of the participants and researcher. I worked hard to mitigate any influence of this potential bias in the data analysis, discussion, and overall dissertation process. For example, I used reflexive journaling to process my own reactions prior to beginning the data analysis stage. Moreover, several readings of the data, themes, and subthemes helped me to reduce my biases because I focused on my participant's lived experiences and not my own. Overall, the researcher as a data collection instrument is a cornerstone of interpretative basic qualitative research. Because of the subjective nature of the focal point of the study, some questions or discussions regarding the topic may not yield a clear picture of the lived experience being studied here because of my biases that were unavoidable. There is the possibility that another researcher attempting to complete a replication of this study may find additional themes based on different perspectives because they were not disciplined

by their state licensing board and subsequently biased during the interpretation of the results. Additionally, a different perspective may be found because of different exposure to unique populations outside of high conflict custody cases.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research in this area should focus on the state licensing board's decision-making processes and timeline requirements they have to make a decision in regard to board complaints. Despite the extensive research including psychologist's ethical requirements, high conflict custody cases, board complaints against a psychologist's license, discipline received from a state licensing board, and the significant risk of receiving a board complaint because of work with high conflict custody cases (Bow et al., 2010; Bricklin et al., 2003; Bucky & Callan, 2014; Thomas, 2005; Van Horne, 2004; Wilkinson et al., 2019), the area of psychologists' lived experiences with their state licensing board has limited research. Moreover, there still seems to be a gap regarding specific research on state licensing board's decision-making processes and discrepancies in their responses compared to the psychologists. For example, all of the participants talked about the timeline they had to adhere to of a response within 30 to 60 days of a board complaint notice, or consequences would be applied. However, they all discussed the lengthy process of the board taking up to five years to conclude their case and in one case participant 2 was still waiting for a conclusion after three years. The limitation within the current study is that the experience of the psychologist's state licensing boards was not explored directly. While this study does not answer every question regarding the

experience of psychologists in regard to dealing with their state licensing board, it could serve as a starting point to begin exploring the systemic issues.

This study focused on the experience of psychologists who have worked with high conflict custody cases. However, it became clear that the participants within the current study also avoided work with any type of client that presented as high conflict. An example of this can be observed with participant 3, who was disciplined by an individual who was suspected of having a personality disorder. Moreover, during interviews, all of the participants spoke about their experience of suspecting personality disorders in their clients that may have contributed to the board complaint being filed. Clients presenting with personality disorders is also confirmed in the literature in regard to the reasons that individuals file board complaints, especially within the high conflict custody population (Bow et al., 2010). Another study could explore the impact of board complaints because of work with clients who are diagnosed with personality disorders.

An additional recommendation would be to focus on psychologists within specialties, such as those working in hospital settings, group practices, the federal government, or another area in which psychologists may work. For instance, contextual variables found in psychologists may provide a contrast to those working with high conflict custody cases. Different treatment settings may yield different results of the likelihood of a board complaint and subsequent discipline. Moreover, different treatment settings may have different experiences within their state licensing board's response.

Another potential study would be a quantitative study that looks at the long-term mental health and emotional impact that discipline received by state licensing boards has

on a psychologist. Focusing on the symptoms of mental health and a psychologist's emotional responses may prove to provide information to help create training programs for psychologists who work with high conflict clients.

Moreover, further research in this area could be focused on quantitative studies surrounding the topic of training, education, and supervision with psychologists who intend to work with high conflict custody as well as clients who present with a personality disorder. This information could assist in developing training programs and enhance ethical practices to equip psychologists to manage a board complaint and subsequent discipline.

Implications and Social Change

This study offers some valuable implications for social change in regard to the field of psychology. Participants frequently reported that the experience of receiving discipline negatively impacted their personal and professional selves. For instance, participants reported feeling a loss of confidence, refusal to work with high conflict clients, and noted shared experiences with the other participants. This presents a concern within the population of high conflict custody cases as well as clients who have been diagnosed with a personality disorder. For instance, this impact is that there is a high percentage of high conflict clients that need psychological services and not enough psychologists to help them. Understanding the lived experiences of psychologists impacts social change because it can lead to necessary changes within the field of psychology.

This research offers a new perspective regarding psychologists who have been disciplined. Participants often reported they had experienced significant distress in

receiving discipline and dealing with their state licensing board. This study may serve to demonstrate that psychologists shared many of the same personal and professional changes, such as no longer working with high conflict custody cases. Moreover, this appeared to be a result of their state licensing board's processes. Understanding why psychologists stop working with specific populations contributes to social change because this information can assist in improving the quality of services and trainings rendered. This, in turn, would serve to improve outcomes for high conflict custody and high conflict clients in need of support, which would result in significant social change.

Moreover, social change can be impacted through an exploration of psychologists and their experiences with their state licensing boards. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) work on stress responses and coping strategies that people use lends itself to further conceptualization of the human behavior of state licensing boards and, in turn, their experiences. By exploring the lived experience of the psychologist with their state licensing board and discipline received, psychologists can continue to improve their own practice and training repertoires.

Regarding these findings, psychologists need to be aware that the process of state licensing boards is not a topic that is commonly discussed but has been recognized as an important element within this study. Psychologists should take steps to improve their state licensing board's processes and responses to board complaints, specifically, the creation of a uniformed structure would be beneficial to psychologists. Moreover, more formal study on the topic is needed, and begin to develop specific timeline requirements and potential immunity for psychologists who work with high conflict custody cases or

clients who have been diagnosed with a personality disorder. Similarly, supervisors may benefit from identifying concerns with high conflict clients and focus on the development of training specific to this population within their current organizational settings. Ultimately, psychologists would begin to review specific training opportunities, legislative change, and significant protections against the damage that high conflict clients can create through a board complaint.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the meaning of the experiences of psychologists who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and have received discipline from their state licensing board. The structure of this study allowed for the researcher to be able to gather specific and unique information from those who are currently immersed in the field. I identified five themes in this study; (a) coping with significant stress experienced; (b) personal impact of emotional challenges; (c) significant emotional impact of discipline received; (d) changes in professional practice; and (e) avoidance of high conflict work. These emergent themes provide an additional line of inquiry for future studies that focus on practitioners at all license levels as the subject. It is the hope of this researcher that this line of research helped to focus the lens of scientific inquiry on the psychologist as a subject of scientific scrutiny and to help better understand this profession.

After completing this study, further inquiry is necessary. However, this study provides a deeper understanding of the lived experience of the psychologist. Through this study, the psychologist's role is one that is varied in daily practice as well as specialty.

While some psychologists work with court cases, all of them have stopped their work with high conflict clients, specifically custody cases. Each psychologist currently serves a unique population and a set of challenging behaviors due to the discipline they received.

It was also made clear that dealing with state licensing boards is not a core area that psychologists directly experience in their training or academic course work. Some psychologists may have learned to manage a board complaint through independent professional development rather than formal academic training, and as a result, a more layperson approach to the concept of board complaints and discipline has been adopted. However, the impact of discipline received can be noted and compared to the experience of other licensed professionals. State licensing board processes and decision-making processes may not be explicitly discussed here, but there is some cause for a new line of inquiry regarding these specific topics.

Board complaints that result in discipline is not a new concept in the field of psychology, however, the literature does not describe this in the way as psychologist's actual lived experiences through the lens of qualitative research. Through this study, the need for ongoing exploration of lived experiences with state licensing boards within licensed practitioners, at all levels, within the psychology field is evident. The impact of discipline received among psychologists has only been briefly discussed through this study, and studies that can expand on the direct impact of this concept within the field of psychology may be beneficial to improving the quality of licensed practitioners' development and training in a rapidly growing field.

As we move forward in the field of psychology, the need for understanding the concept of state licensing boards and discipline received as a helping profession continues to grow. The need for psychologists who are specifically trained and educated with high conflict clients and custody has continued to grow exponentially. Psychologists impact individuals with high conflict custody cases. Psychologists play a vital role in the field of psychology. The continued exploration of the impact of working with challenging clients should continue in order to help psychologists navigate and understand potential issues and risks especially in their work with high conflict clients.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear Licensed Psychologist,

We are inviting you to participate in a study about your experiences with receiving discipline from a board complaint as a psychologist who worked with high conflict custody cases. The primary researcher has been disciplined from a board complaint due to her work on high conflict custody cases. **We are interested in exploring and understanding the meaning of the experiences of psychologists who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and have received discipline from their state licensing board.** Our hope is that the results of this research will help us to shed light on the nature of the coping strategies used among those who are currently or previously worked with high conflict custody cases within the field.

The current inclusion criteria for this study are as follows:

- Must be a current or past licensed psychologist, regardless of current standing with their state licensing board
- Must have experience of practice with at least 1 high conflict custody case within your practice
- Must have been disciplined by your state licensing board at least once

Additionally, master level clinicians will not be included in this study.

Please know that your participation will remain confidential. Your participation is entirely voluntary. We will be conducting interviews as part of this research using a semistructured interview style with nine primary questions and some potential follow-up questions. These interviews should take approximately 60 minutes.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Walden University. If you have any questions or would like to participate, please email Stephanie Norris at stephanie.norris3@waldenu.edu.

Please email me at stephanie.norris3@waldenu.edu if you are interested in participating in this study. Your participation is vital in helping me contribute to the limited research on high conflict custody cases and the difficulties psychologists have experienced when dealing with board complaints and subsequent discipline from our state licensing boards.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Norris, MA, MS, LPC, LAC

Appendix B: Rejection Email

Dear Licensed Psychologist,

Thank you for your interest in this study. As you are aware, we were inviting you to participate in a study about your experiences with receiving discipline from a board complaint as a psychologist who worked with high conflict custody cases. Additionally, there was specific inclusion criteria to be met in order to participate in this study.

Unfortunately, the following inclusion criteria for this study were not met:

In order to participate in this study, potential participants must meet the following criteria:

- Must be a current or past licensed psychologist, regardless of current standing with their state licensing board
- Must have experience of practice with at least 1 high conflict custody case within your practice
- Must have been disciplined by your state licensing board at least once

Currently, master level clinicians will not be included in this study.

Please know that your desire to participate in this study will remain confidential.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Walden University. If you have any questions, please email Stephanie Norris at stephanie.norris3@waldenu.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Norris, MA, MS, LPC, LAC

Appendix C: Open-Ended Interview Questions

The following questions have been developed for the semistructured interview design as part of this study:

Open-Ended Conversational Interviews

The following open-ended interview questions will be used:

1. What has been your experience with your state licensing board prior to receiving a complaint?
2. What were you aware of in the case, without giving specific details of the case, prior to receiving board complaint?
3. How did you become aware that there was a board complaint?
4. What was your experience with the state licensing board?
5. What did you feel after you received the discipline?
6. What were your coping strategies after you received the discipline from your state licensing board?
7. What kind of impact did/do you see on your professional practice after you received the discipline?
8. What kind of impact do you see on your professional practice now because of the discipline you received?
9. What kind of impact did you see on your personal life because of the discipline received?

Appendix D: Reminder Email

Dear Licensed Psychologist,

This is a friendly reminder of the previous email invitation to participate in our study.

We are inviting you to participate in a study about your experiences with receiving discipline from a board complaint as a psychologist who worked with high conflict custody cases. The primary researcher has been disciplined from a board complaint due to her work on high conflict custody cases. **We are interested in exploring and understanding the meaning of the experiences of psychologists who have worked or are currently working on high-conflict custody cases and have received discipline from their state licensing board.** Our hope is that the results of this research will help us to shed light on the nature of the coping strategies used among those who are currently or previously worked with high conflict custody cases within the field.

The current inclusion criteria for this study are as follows:

- Must be a current or past licensed psychologist, regardless of current standing with their state licensing board
- Must have experience of practice with at least 1 high conflict custody case within your practice
- Must have been disciplined by your state licensing board at least once

Additionally, master level clinicians will not be included in this study.

Please know that your participation will remain confidential. Your participation is entirely voluntary. We will be conducting interviews as part of this research using a semistructured interview style with nine primary questions and some potential follow-up questions. These interviews should take approximately 60 minutes.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Walden University. If you have any questions or would like to participate, please email Stephanie Norris at stephanie.norris3@waldenu.edu.

Please email me at stephanie.norris3@waldenu.edu if you are interested in participating in this study. Your participation is vital in helping me contribute to the limited research on high conflict custody cases and the difficulties psychologists have experienced when dealing with board complaints and subsequent discipline from our state licensing boards.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Norris, MA, MS, LPC, LAC