



## Research Article

# Relationships among counselor trainees' emotional intelligence, stress and empathy

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High levels of emotional intelligence, low levels of stress and high empathetic tendencies are successful counselor training propellers. However, ostensibly, relationships between such variables among counselor trainees are underexplored. Thus, this study evaluated such relationships with a cross-sectional, correlational design. A questionnaire made of the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire, the Perceived Stress Scale, and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index collected data from 92 respondents. The study employed means and standard deviations, *t*-test, Pearson's correlation, and multiple linear regression to analyze the data set. The means and standard deviations analysis revealed that counselor trainees had high levels of emotional intelligence, moderate stress and high empathy levels. Also, the *t*-test analysis revealed a not statistically significant difference in their gender, age and years of training concerning the evaluated variables. Additionally, Pearson's correlation showed that emotional intelligence and empathy levels correlated positively, a moderate negative correlation existed between emotional intelligence and stress levels, and a weak negative correlation existed between stress and empathy. Finally, the multiple linear regression revealed that emotional intelligence and stress levels jointly predicted empathy. These findings suggest that counselor trainees with high emotional intelligence levels will have lower stress levels and higher empathetic dispositions. Thus, there is a need for counselor educators to use awareness creation, curriculum infused with emotional intelligence activities, and stress management workshops to assist counselor trainees in demonstrating higher emotional intelligence levels and stress resilience and coping mechanisms to enrich their empathetic tendencies.

**Keywords:** Counselor trainee, emotional intelligence, stress, empathy

## 1. Introduction

The training stage of counselors is a professional-budding stage that requires them to identify their personal and developmental needs. The training poses a personal and professional risk with attendant emotional turmoil and excitement (Sawatzky et al., 1994). Traditionally, counselors are vulnerable to elevated stress. Such stress negatively impacts their personal and professional functioning (Richardson et al., 2018).

Gutierrez et al. (2017) asserted that lower stress levels were associated with higher emotional intelligence and affective and cognitive empathy among counselor trainees. Thus, an expectation is that counselor trainees must be less stressed with adequate emotional intelligence levels to make them more empathic in practicum and general functioning (Hodges, 2016; McLeod, 2010). Nonetheless, in Africa, Ghana and at the University of Education, Winneba, seemingly, factual studies into the levels and associations of emotional intelligence, stress, and empathy among counselor trainees are implicit. It is unclear how these variables relate among themselves to contribute to the molding of a competent counselor in a graduate school. Thus, there is a need to assess the correlation between emotional intelligence, stress and empathy among counselor trainees at the University of Education, Winneba.

### 1.1. Stress

Stress is a fact of life that assist people in protecting themselves from immediate physical danger (Greenberg, 2016). Stress influences depression and the risk of physiological diseases (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2012). To Baqutayan et al. (2018), stress is neither good nor bad. Thus, postgraduate students are inevitably prone to stress in their daily endeavors. However, the challenge of stress is identifying the source of the stressors and handling them intelligently to reduce them. Myers et al. (2012) asserted that stress harms academic performance, clinical skills, and personal well-being. Sleep hygiene, emotion regulation and adequate social support are factors in managing stress among psychology graduate students (Myers et al., 2012).

Hodges (2016) mentioned that counselor educators and fellow graduate students provide more stress to counselor trainees. Thus, counselor educators and graduate students are a source of burnout to the trainees than the counselees that the trainees help in practicum. Unequivocally, Hodges (2016) further stated from experience that counselors, counselor trainees and other mental health professionals who are often stressed feel reluctant to seek counseling services. The researcher, therefore, admonished future professional counselors to use graduate school as the optimal time and place to address their mental health. And, most importantly, to understand their issues and work to improve them.

### 1.2. Emotional Intelligence

Thoughts and emotions guide environmental interactions. The preceding emotions of such interactions manifest as emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2009). Emotional intelligence is a human ability to combine competencies and skills to enhance cognitive abilities that lead to the understanding and management of self and others in relationships (Hajibabae et al., 2018; Joshith, 2012). Inherently, perceiving, utilizing and managing emotions is essential to everyday practice for people in different careers and training (Goleman, 2009; Ravikumar et al., 2017). Counseling as a career is not an exception to the claim of Ravikumar et al. (2017) and Goleman (2009). High emotional intelligence among counselors and trainees has created a working alliance between supervisors and supervisees (Cooper & Ng, 2009). Also, counselors who reported higher Emotional Intelligence achieved better counseling outcomes and improved counselor-counselee relationships (Kaplowitz et al., 2011). Generally, Cazan and Năstasă (2015) indicated that students with higher levels of emotional intelligence had less stress, anxiety, and depression and higher levels of satisfaction with life (Cazan & Năstasă, 2015).

For counselors to respond to and regulate the feelings and emotions of their clients, they need a self-exploration of their emotional patterns (McLeod, 2010). Emotional intelligence is a fundamental counseling skill and a personality variable that builds quality relationships (Cooper & Ng, 2009; Gutierrez et al., 2017). Clemons (2017) indicated that adequate studies established that emotional intelligence contributes significantly to self-efficacy. High emotional intelligence levels among counselors lead to a successful counseling outcome. Also, higher emotional intelligence levels decrease burnout in counselor trainees. Mustaffa et al. (2013) identified three elements in a counseling service that counselors and counselor trainees must not ignore. They are emotional intelligence, skills competency and counselor quality improvement. According to them, among the three elements, emotional intelligence is the most imperative in assessing the self-effectiveness of the helper.

### 1.3. Empathy

The emergence of counseling and psychotherapy gave popularity to the subject of empathy. Empathy is a cognitive and emotional capacity to genuinely and accurately understand, reflect, feel and value a related person's situation and concern (Bernstein et al., 2008; Davis, 1980; Ioannidou & Konstantikaki, 2008; Keeran, 2012). Empathy contributes to positive relationships in all areas of life (Keeran, 2012). It makes people feel part of a community. With empathy, people accept people unconditionally. Empathy is a core technique in a counseling hub that predicts self-

efficacy (Karaman et al., 2018). It is an ingredient for a successful counselor-client interaction. As a countenance of deeper emotions, empathy provides a haven through a listening ear (Cochran & Cochran, 2015). Counseling training obligates counselor trainees to display empathy while establishing appropriate boundaries with clients, especially in practicum (Hodges, 2016). A belief is that counselor trainees are supposed to be more empathic than their academic peers in other disciplines.

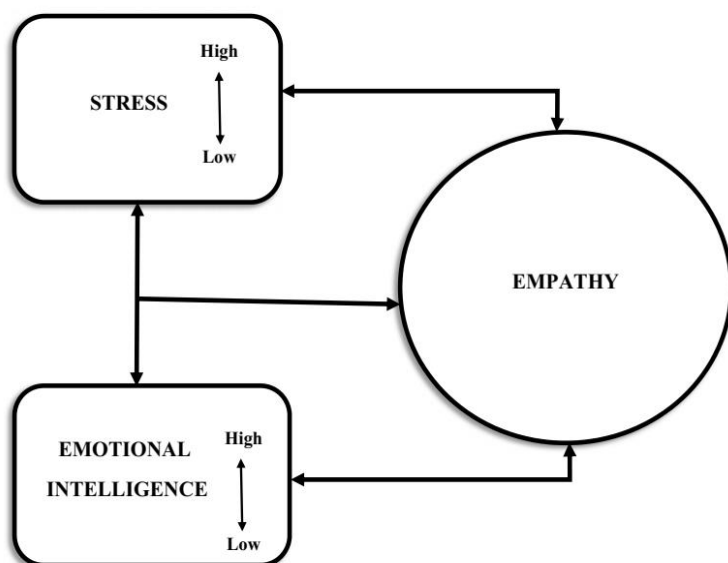
Nonetheless, Bloom et al. (2018) established that counselor trainees are not more or less concerned than their academic peers in other disciplines. However, Gutierrez et al. (2017) viewed counselor trainees as people with adequate levels of empathy. Empathic skill is a therapeutic enhancement skill that a counselor acquires in training (Cochran & Cochran, 2015). Bloom et al. (2018) proposed a comprehensive counselor education program to develop empathy among counselor trainees. Empathy is an essential principle of a therapeutic alliance (Thorne, 2003). It is a powerful healing agent for both the giver and the receiver. Empathic tendencies allow a counselor to enter a client's perceptual world like their own. As counselors try to feel their clients' sufferings and express them through bodily sensations, they develop empathy for the clients (Leonard et al., 2018).

#### 1.4. Purpose of Study

This study, therefore, examines the correlation between emotional intelligence, stress, and empathy among counselor trainees at the University of Education, Winneba. We conceptualized that emotional intelligence levels, stress and empathy levels significantly relate. We also postulated that emotional intelligence and stress levels significantly predict empathetic tendencies. Thus, we proposed a conceptual model, Figure 1, to examine the correlation.

Figure 1

*Conceptual Model of Relationships among Emotional Intelligence, Stress and Empathy*



*Note: Emotional intelligence and stress levels would predict empathy.*

The following questions thus guided the study: (a) What are the levels of emotional intelligence, stress and empathy among counselor trainees? (b) What differences exist among emotional intelligence, stress levels and empathy levels according to gender, age, and years in a study of counselor trainees? (c) What level of correlation exists among the emotional intelligence, stress and empathy of counselor trainees? (d) Would counselor trainees' emotional intelligence and stress levels predict their empathy levels?

The outcome of this study shall contribute to counseling and counselor education literature. The study will also inform counselor trainees, educators and policy stakeholders about counselor trainees' emotional intelligence, stress and empathy levels. It will also guide stakeholders on the

roles and the effects of stress and emotional intelligence in counselor education. Furthermore, it would make counselor trainees aware that graduate school is the optimal place and time to begin addressing their mental health issues. That will ensure that whatever personal concerns do not impact their counseling work. It will finally spark a healthy and scholarly debate among trainees, educators, faculty members, curriculum developers, policymakers and counseling practice regulators on whether there is a need for emotional intelligence and stress management training in postgraduate-level counseling training in Ghana.

## **2. Method**

We used a cross-sectional, correlational study design in this study to use single-point data to determine the relationships among the study variables without establishing a causal connection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **2.1. Population and Sample**

Two groups of masters-level counselor trainees study at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana. They are the regular Master of Philosophy counselor trainees and the sandwich mode Master of Education counselor trainees. Considering a variation in their characteristics, we chose the masters-level counselor trainees as our population. Also, desiring detailed information from most masters-level counselor trainees in the sandwich program, we employed a census survey for this study. However, the participation was voluntary. A total of 101 counselor trainees out of a total population of 153 who are studying for the 2021/2022 academic year on sandwich mode responded to the study instruments. The sandwich mode of education at the University of Education, Winneba, is a system where students come to campus to study during vacation periods of the regular full-time study sessions. Thus, sandwich sessions commence when the full-time study sessions are on vacation. Nine of the packs of questionnaires that they responded to were incomplete. Thus, the completed responses to the study instruments were 92.

Of the respondents, 62% identified themselves as women, and the remaining 38% as men. Also, 73% of respondents indicated they were 35 years and above. A section, 27% of them responded that they were below 35 years. For marital status, 64% of respondents identified as married, and 36% identified as single. Accordingly, 53% of respondents were in year one of their training studies. The data also revealed that 47% of the respondents were in year two of their training studies. Invariably, 87% of respondents identified as employed. Additionally, 13% of respondents identified as unemployed.

### **2.2. Instruments**

We used a questionnaire to collect demographic data from the counselor trainees. Aside, we used the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983). Additionally, we used the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980). Finally, we use the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form (Petrides, 2009) to gather information about the counselor trainees. We excluded sensitivity such as ethnicity, political affiliation, and disability status from the demographic items and made experts review them for readability, clarity and comprehensiveness.

We employed a pretest to localize the language of the questionnaire and ensure its quality and ability to collect the desired data in the survey in a Ghanaian environment, particularly among the counselor trainees. The pretest was beneficial because it allowed the population to aid in establishing a quality questionnaire. It also gathered information about the counselor trainees' understanding, encounters, and response latency. The outcome of the pretest in this study indicated that the Perceived Stress Scale, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, and Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form were acceptable for the study. The Cronbach alpha of the Perceived Stress Scale was .70. That of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index was .74, and the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form was .81.

### 2.3. Data Collection

We used two methods to administer questionnaires; the personally administered questionnaire and the collective administration methods. We obtained official permission from the school of graduate studies and the head of the counseling psychology department. We contacted respondents, established rapport and served them with informed consent forms. A week after we had conducted the pretest, we administered the instruments to respondents during their captive moments when assembled in one place. We gave the respondents 30 minutes to complete and return all the questionnaires. We administered the questionnaires at the Faculty of Educational Studies, University of Education, Winneba, face-to-face to the respondents while adhering strictly to the Covid-19 prevention protocols at gatherings. We assured them of confidentiality. We also established anonymity by informing them not to indicate their names or any form of initials on any packs or a questionnaire. Most of the respondents completed and returned the questionnaire pack within 25 minutes.

### 2.4. Data Analysis

We employed Microsoft Excel 2006 and Addinsoft XLSTAT 2022.5.2 to organize, collate and analyze the data collected. Specifically, using Microsoft Excel 2006, we employed means and standard deviations to evaluate the levels of emotional intelligence, stress and empathy among counselor trainees. Using the Addinsoft XLSTAT 2022.5.2, we also conducted a *t*-test to analyze the differences between counselor trainees' levels of emotional intelligence, stress and empathy according to gender, age and study years. Additionally, we performed a Pearson's correlation analysis to assess the correlation between emotional intelligence, stress and empathy. Lastly, we used multiple linear regression analysis to recognize emotional intelligence and stress as predictors of the third variable, empathy.

## 3. Results

The dynamics of the analysis are rooted in the objectives of the study. Therefore, the findings are in the framework of the research questions.

### 3.1. Levels of Emotional Intelligence, Stress and Empathy

The study sought to find the levels of emotional intelligence, stress and empathy among counselor trainees. The summary statistics concerning the variables studied concerning research question one are in Table 1. Table 1 presents the summary statistics, Cronbach Alpha, and independent samples *t*-test on levels of emotional intelligence, stress and empathy using the TEIQue-SF, PSS, and IRI.

As shown in Table 1, the descriptive analysis of the TEIQue-SF showed that the mean total score obtained was ( $M = 150.79$ ,  $SD = 21.09$ ). The Cronbach alpha value was .81. The mean total score of the TEIQue-SF was high, indicating that respondents had high levels of emotional intelligence. Also, the descriptive analysis of PSS showed that the mean total score obtained was ( $M = 16.26$ ,  $SD = 5.80$ ). The Cronbach Alpha value was .70. The mean total score of the PSS fell within the moderate stress score range. Thus, counselor trainees were moderately perceived stressed. Furthermore, the descriptive analysis of the IRI showed a mean total score of ( $M = 90.62$ ,  $SD = 13.73$ ). The Cronbach Alpha value obtained was .74. The mean total score obtained reflected high levels of perceptions of empathy among counselor trainees.

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

Variables	N	TEIQue-SF		PSS		IRI	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Number of trainees	92 <sup>^</sup>	150.79	21.09	16.26	5.80	90.62	13.73
			.81*		.70*		.74*
Gender							
Men	35	152.46	24.93	14.80	5.85	91.51	10.27
Women	57	149.77	18.50	17.16	5.64	90.07	15.54
			.58 <sup>x</sup>		.06 <sup>x</sup>		.59 <sup>x</sup>
Age							
Below 35 years	25	151.20	23.76	16.52	5.11	92.52	13.79
35 years & above	67	150.64	20.19	16.16	6.07	89.91	13.74
			.91 <sup>x</sup>		.80 <sup>x</sup>		.42 <sup>x</sup>
Years in training							
Year 1	49	150.22	23.17	16.63	5.92	89.33	14.34
Year 2	43	151.44	18.68	15.84	5.71	92.09	11.01
			.78 <sup>x</sup>		.51 <sup>x</sup>		.34 <sup>x</sup>

Note. TEIQue-SF = Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire - Short Form; PSS = Perceived Stress Scale; IRI = Interpersonal Reactivity Index; \* Cronbach's alpha; <sup>x</sup> two-tailed *p*, <sup>^</sup> Nine out of the 101 questionnaires returned were incomplete.

### 3.2. Differences in the Levels of Emotional Intelligence, Stress and Empathy

The study predicted a significant difference between demographics (gender, age, and years in the study) and levels of emotional intelligence, stress, and empathy. The results in Table 1 indicated that the mean total score obtained by counselor trainees responding as men ( $M = 152.46$ ,  $SD = 24.93$ ) was higher than that of counselor trainees as women ( $M = 149.77$ ,  $SD = 18.50$ ). Independent-sample *t*-test results revealed no significant difference between men and women counselor trainees ( $p = .58$ ).

Similarly, the men's mean total scores ( $M = 91.51$ ,  $SD = 10.27$ ) in the IRI were higher than the women's mean scores ( $M = 90.07$ ,  $SD = 15.54$ ). Independent samples *t*-test indicated no significant difference between men's and women's scores ( $p = .59$ ). Moreover, the descriptive statistics on stress among counselor trainees revealed that women's mean total scores ( $M = 17.16$ ,  $SD = 5.64$ ) were higher than men's mean scores ( $M = 14.80$ ,  $SD = 5.85$ ). Independent samples *t*-test indicated in Table 1 showed no significant difference between men's and women's mean total scores ( $p = .06$ ).

The study also analyzed the age differences concerning TEIQue-SF, PSS, and IRI. The descriptive statistics obtained on TEIQue-SF, as presented in Table 9, indicated that the mean total score obtained by counselor trainees below the age of 35 years ( $M = 151.20$ ,  $SD = 23.76$ ) was higher than that of counselor trainees with age 35 years and above ( $M = 150.64$ ,  $SD = 20.19$ ). Independent samples *t*-test revealed no significant difference between counselor trainees below the age of 35 years and counselor trainees 35 years and above ( $p = .91$ ). Moreover, the counselor trainees below the age of 35 mean total scores in the PSS ( $M = 16.52$ ,  $SD = 5.11$ ) were higher than that of counselor trainees aged 35 years and above ( $M = 16.16$ ,  $SD = 6.07$ ). Independent samples *t*-test showed no significant difference between counselor trainees below the age of 35 years and counselor trainees that were 35 years and above scores ( $p = .80$ ).

Similarly, the mean total score obtained by counselor trainees below the age of 35 for IRI ( $M = 92.52$ ,  $SD = 13.79$ ) was higher than the mean total score obtained by those 35 years and above ( $M = 89.91$ ,  $SD = 13.74$ ). The independent samples *t*-test showed no significant difference between scores of counselor trainees below the age of 35 and scores of those aged 35 years and above ( $p = .42$ ).

Invariably, the study analyzed differences in years in the training (academic experiences) concerning TEIQue-SF, PSS, and IRI. The descriptive statistics on TEIQue-SF showed that the mean

total score obtained by counselor trainees in year two of the training ( $M = 151.44, SD = 18.68$ ) was higher than that of counselor trainees in year one ( $M = 150.22, SD = 23.17$ ). The independent samples  $t$ -test ( $p = .78$ ) showed no significant difference between counselor trainees in year two of the training and those in year one. On PSS, the descriptive statistics showed that the mean total score for counselor trainees in year one ( $M = 16.63, SD = 5.92$ ) was higher than that of counselor trainees in year two ( $M = 15.84, SD = 5.71$ ). Also, the independent samples  $t$ -test ( $p = .51$ ) indicated no statistically significant difference between counselor trainees in year one and those in year two.

As shown in Table 1, the study further identified that the mean total score obtained by counselor trainees in year two in the IRI ( $M = 92.09, SD = 11.01$ ) was higher than that of counselor trainees in year one ( $M = 89.33, SD = 14.34$ ). Additionally,  $t$ -test showed no significant difference between counselor trainees in year two and those in year one ( $p = .34$ ).

### 3.3. Correlation between the Levels of Emotional Intelligence, Stress, and Empathy

The study employed Pearson’s correlation tests to identify the correlation between counselor trainees’ emotional intelligence, stress, and empathy. The results of the tests are in Table 2. The values obtained from Pearson’s correlation tests in Table 2 indicated that the TEIQue-SF and the PSS score showed a moderate negative correlation ( $r = -.41, p < .0001$ ). Similarly, the sub-analyses according to demographics showed that concerning gender, there was a moderate negative correlation between TEIQue-SF score and PSS (men [ $r = -.31, p = .071$ ], women [ $r = -.5, p < .0001$ ]). Also, concerning age (counselor trainees below 35 years [ $r = -.46, p = .020$ ], counselor trainees 35 years and above [ $r = -.40, p = .001$ ]), the sub-analysis showed a moderate negative correlation between TEIQue-SF score and PSS score. Similarly, the sub-analysis of the TEIQue-SF score and PSS score for years in training indicated a moderate negative correlation (year one [ $r = -.41, p = .003$ ], year two [ $r = -.42, p = .006$ ]).

Also, a moderate positive correlation existed between the TEIQue-SF and IRI values ( $r = .38, p < .001$ ). In the sub-analyses comprising gender, a strong positive correlation existed between TEIQue-SF and IRI concerning men counselor trainees ( $r = .57, p < .001$ ). With women counselor trainees, a moderate positive correlation existed ( $r = .31, p = .018$ ). Considering age, the TEIQue-SF and IRI showed a moderate positive correlation (counselor trainees below 35 years [ $r = .42, p = .035$ ], counselor trainees 35 years and above [ $r = .37, p = .002$ ]). Similarly, the TEIQue-SF and IRI summary scores showed a moderate positive correlation for years in the training (year one [ $r = .38, p = .007$ ], year two [ $r = .39, p = .010$ ]). The summary scores of the analysis showed that PSS and IRI were not statistically correlated ( $r = -.04, p = .728$ ). In the sub-analyses comprising the gender, age and study-year level, correlations between the PSS and the IRI were similar to the scores obtained for all counselor trainees.

Table 2  
Pearson’s Correlation Coefficients of the Study Variables ( $n = 92$ )

Variable	TEIQue-SF & PSS			TEIQue-SF & IRI			PSS & IRI		
	<i>r</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>r</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>r</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>
All trainees	-.41	<.0001	.170	.38	<.001	.147	-.04	.728	.001
Gender									
Men	-.31	.071	.096	.57	<.001	.328	-.03	.857	.001
Women	-.50	<.0001	.250	.31	.018	.097	-.03	.847	.001
Age									
Below 35years	-.46	.020	.214	.42	.035	.179	.12	.575	.014
35years & above	-.40	.001	.161	.37	.002	.135	-.09	.481	.008
Years in training									
One	-.41	.003	.169	.38	.007	.144	.05	.724	.003
Two	-.42	.006	.173	.39	.010	.151	-.14	.381	.019

Note. TEIQue-SF = Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire - Short Form; PSS = Perceived Stress Scale; IRI = Interpersonal Reactivity Index.

### 3.4. Emotional Intelligence and Stress as Predictors of Empathy

The study used multiple linear regression analysis to test if emotional intelligence and stress significantly predicted empathy. The study fell on the simultaneous regression or the forced entry regression type. The results of the multiple linear regression analysis are in Table 3.

Table 3

*Regression Model of the Predicting Variables (n =92)*

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	$R^2$	<i>Adjusted R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>T</i>	<i>Sig t</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
IRI (Constant)	41.47	12.76				3.25	.002**	[16.1, 66.8]
TEIQue-SF	.29	.07	.44			4.17	<.0001***	[.151, .4]
				.16	.15			
PSS	.35	.25	.15			1.37	.173°	[-.154, .8]

*Note.* IRI = Interpersonal Reactivity Index; TEIQue-SF = Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire - Short Form; PSS = Perceived Stress Scale; CI = confidence interval; Signification codes: 0 < \*\*\* < .001 < \*\* < .01 < \* < .05 < . < .1 < ° < 1.

The overall regression model involving emotional intelligence and stress to predict empathy was statistically significant ( $R^2 = .16$ ,  $F(2, 89) = 8.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Given the p-value of the F statistic and the significance level of 5%, the information brought by emotional intelligence and stress is significantly better than what the mean (*M*) would indicate. Given the  $R^2$ , emotional intelligence and stress scores explained 16% ( $Adjusted R^2 = .15$ ) of the variability of empathy. Preferably, the regression model was not a bad predictor of empathy scores. Furthermore, emotional intelligence ( $\beta = .44$ ,  $t = 4.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ) explains the variability of empathy. Thus, emotional intelligence significantly predicted empathy scores. Comparably, stress ( $\beta = .15$ ,  $t = 1.37$ ,  $p < .01$ ) did not explain the variability of empathy. Invariably, stress scores did not significantly predict empathy scores though they contributed to the prediction of empathy scores. Finally, Among the explanatory variables, emotional intelligence is the most influential. In summary, emotional intelligence emerged as a single predictor or projector of empathy. From the results in Table 3, counselor trainees' emotional intelligence and stress successfully predicted their empathy scores since the regression model predicted 16% of empathy scores. Invariably, other factors would have also contributed to the untested prediction. However, regression analysis with stress as a single predictor to determine its added value to the  $R^2$  value implies that the information brought by stress is not significantly better than what the mean would indicate.

### 4. Discussion

The study evaluated relationships among counselor trainees' emotional intelligence, stress and empathy in a Ghanaian university. The results suggest that higher emotional intelligence relates to lower stress, higher emotional intelligence relates to higher empathy, and lower stress levels relate to higher empathic levels. This finding is consistent with the findings of Gutierrez et al. (2017), who asserted that higher emotional intelligence is associated with higher counselor empathy and higher emotional intelligence is related to lower stress. This study also made a unique finding that suggests that emotional intelligence and stress levels statistically predicted empathy levels among counselor trainees.

Assessing the levels of emotional intelligence, stress and empathy among counselor trainees, the study ascertains that counselor trainees have high emotional intelligence, moderate stress level and high empathy scores. Though counselor trainees have high levels of emotional intelligence, the study did not allow them to report the factors that contributed to the high levels of emotional intelligence. However, the high levels of emotional intelligence could be from academic experiences since all counselor trainees already have first degrees. Notable in this study, counselor trainees in year two of the training report higher levels of emotional intelligence than those in year one. On the contrary, Barbash (2015) asserted that years of graduate training do not directly affect levels of emotional intelligence. Correspondingly, the finding on emotional intelligence levels is consistent with Lewis (2019) and Gutierrez et al. (2017). They also identified that, generally, counselor trainees reported high levels of emotional intelligence.



The findings on counselor trainees' stress levels vary from Kumary and Baker (2008), who found that counselor trainees reported unacceptable higher stress levels, with stressors such as academic, placements, and personal and professional development. The moderate-level stress scores reported by counselor trainees in this study may be because they manage their stress while practicing self-care, based on their undergraduate training in counseling. Myers et al. (2012) indicated that such students reported significant stress levels ranging from low to high. Invariably, studies and findings specifying counselor trainees' stress are not forthcoming because the nature of counseling assumes that the counselor has adequate self-care to help clients address their emotional, social and physical stressors. Thus, there would not be a need to find out the stress levels of counselor trainees. However, it is worthwhile to note that women counselor trainees reported higher levels of stress than men counselor trainees. This finding is inconsistent with Atindanbila and BanyenRejoice (2011), who identified an increase in male students' stressors than that of females. Also, counselor trainees in year one reported higher stress levels than their colleagues in year two. Atindanbila and BanyenRejoice (2011) asserted that students at lower levels at a university encounter higher stress than their counterparts at higher levels.

The findings that counselor trainees reported high empathy levels allude that counselor trainees have knowledge, training and practice in the core counseling conditions. Knowing and practicing the core counseling conditions is mandatory in counselor training (Hodges, 2016). However, Bloom et al. (2018) asserted that there is nothing unique about counselor trainees' reported high levels of empathy since a study conducted could not differentiate between the counselor trainees' empathy levels and that of students from other academic and training disciplines. Additionally, male counselor trainees reported higher empathy than female counselor trainees. The findings are consistent with Sa et al. (2019) but contradict Park et al. (2015) assertion that women's emotional sensitivity negatively affects their empathy than that of men. Also, counselor trainees below 35 years reported higher empathy than those 35 years and above. Sun et al. (2017) asserted that no clear correlation exists between age and empathy. However, Sommerlad et al. (2021) indicated that empathy grows with age. Finally, counselor trainees in year two reported higher empathy than trainees in year one. Derksen et al. (2021) asserted that empathy is an element of personal growth. Thus, with experience, trainees would improve their empathy levels.

Statistically, there are nonsignificant differences in counselor trainees' gender, age and years in the training concerning emotional intelligence, stress and empathy. Although men counselor trainees report higher total emotional intelligence levels, the difference between genders is insignificant. Sharma and Sehwat (2014) asserted that gender does not influence the emotional intelligence levels of an individual. As Doherty et al. (2013) confirmed the finding of this study that there is no significant difference between men and women students' emotional intelligence scores, Partido et al. (2021) also confirmed the results of this study that men have higher domain scores in emotional intelligence when compared to women. The finding may also be of a perception that society requires men in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Ghanaians, to suppress their emotions and endure discomfort. Nonetheless, Sánchez-Ruiz et al. (2010) asserted that men and women scored equally higher emotional intelligence levels.

Similarly, the difference between genders concerning empathy and stress is not statistically significant. However, men counselor trainees report higher total empathy levels when compared to women. Conversely, as asserted by Park et al. (2015), it manifests in the findings of this study that women counselor trainees report higher stress levels when compared to men. Park et al. (2015) reiterated that women are biologically disposed to emotions that prone them to high empathy levels and sensitivity to stress. The finding on stress levels concerning gender is also consistent with Adasi et al. (2020). They asserted that the stressors of these women are psychosocial, academic, and health. They concluded that women use praying/meditating and self-distracting methods to cope with stress. The findings of this study may be due to unavoidable excessive multitasking since several women counselor trainees are married with children. They manage a home as an African mother, seeking further studies and working concurrently.

Though the differences between ages concerning emotional intelligence stress and empathy are not statistically significant, slight variations existed in the total levels reported. Counselor trainees below 35 years report higher emotional intelligence levels than counselor trainees 35 years and above. This finding is consistent with Fleming (2020), who indicated that older counseling students have low emotional intelligence levels than younger counseling students. The differences between ages concerning emotional intelligence levels are consistent with Sharma and Sehrawat (2014). Sharma and Sehrawat (2014) asserted that emotional intelligence levels and age do not have a relationship. Thus, age cannot predict the emotional intelligence levels of an individual. The finding's consistency with others may indicate that counselor trainees below the age of 35 are mature and have adequate education and practical experience in counseling. However, the finding contradicts the general assertion (Palmer et al., 2005) that emotional intelligence increases with age.

The differences between ages concerning stress levels are consistent with Cohen et al. (1983), and Saleh et al. (2017), that asserted that age does not significantly affect stress. This study found that counselor trainees below 35 years report higher stress levels than those aged 35 and above. The findings may factor into the perception that older people are more relaxed with stressful events than younger people. The differences between ages concerning empathy levels are not consistent with Richter and Kunzmann (2011), Sommerlad et al. (2021), and Sun et al. (2018), that identified that older people generally reported and expressed higher levels of empathy than those younger than their age. Thus, they concluded that empathy levels increased with age. Some factors that may have influenced the finding of this study on differences between ages concerning empathy levels are unknown. Subsequent studies may explore some of these factors.

The difference between years in the training concerning emotional intelligence, stress and empathy is not statistically significant. The findings relating to the difference between years in training are consistent with Cavanagh and Cavanagh (2018), who suggested that a sustainable change at a behavioral level requires a structured program in addition to duration. Contrary, Nelis et al. (2009) asserted that controlled training on emotional intelligence does not necessarily increase the levels of emotional intelligence in the group. Invariably, the reported total levels of emotional intelligence among counselor trainees in year two of the training are higher. It may be due to learning experiences, exposure to counselees and use of adequate counseling skills in practicum.

The not statistically significant difference between years in the training concerning empathy may be because participants reckon empathy as an inherent behavioral and psychological art that grows with years of impulsive experiences. Counselor trainees in year two obtained higher scores in empathy levels than counselor trainees in year one. It may profess that the mandatory core counseling conditions that equip counselors to function effectively grow with time, training, practice and experience.

Concerning the finding of this study that the difference between years in the training concerning stress is not statistically significant, Mohamed and Baqutayan (2015) asserted that stress succumbs to numerous factors ranging from environmental to genetics. Concluding, the exploration of the cyclical evolution of stress is sceptical. Thus, in the assertion of Saleh et al. (2017), the dynamism of stress revolves mainly around self-efficacy and self-esteem. The findings also suggest that the counselor trainees in year one of training are more stressed than those in year two. It may be due to doles of numerous theoretical works in year one of the studies compared to practicum and thesis writing in year two of the program.

In this study, emotional intelligence and empathy correlated positively. The finding is not novel and surprising since Petrides and Mavroveli (2018) indicated that empathy is a significant component of emotional intelligence. Hajibabae et al. (2018) also asserted a positive correlation between emotional intelligence and empathy. However, Sa et al. (2019) indicated that a significant small but positive relationship existed between emotional intelligence and empathy.

This study shows a moderate negative correlation between emotional intelligence and stress. The findings correspond with Jahanara (2014) that emotionally intelligent people deal better with environmental demands. The result is consistent with numerous studies (Baqutayan et al., 2018; Zarei et al., 2019) that indicated that emotional intelligence correlates negatively with stress. This

result may be because though counselor trainees have high emotional intelligence, theoretical, practicum and thesis-related stressors compounded with work, campus, and family life stressors may have bedeviled them.

Concerning the relationship between stress and empathy, the findings of this study suggest a negative correlation. However, the correlation was weak. This result is inconsistent with previous findings (Gutierrez et al., 2017; Park et al., 2015) that found that empathy and stress are strongly negatively correlated. However, Wahjudi et al. (2019) found no significant correlation between stress and empathy levels. Wahjudi et al. (2019) were emphatic that though they did not find a significant correlation between stress and empathy levels, previous studies reported that some predicting variables of stress are factors in a decline in empathy levels.

The present study also examined the prediction effect of emotional intelligence and stress on empathy. Findings indicate that emotional intelligence significantly predicts empathy. This finding infers that increases in counselor trainees' emotional intelligence levels will increase their empathy scores. This outcome is consistent with the assertion of Gutierrez et al. (2017) that emotional intelligence is significant in counselor trainees' empathy levels. The study also identified that emotional intelligence and stress will jointly predict empathy among graduate-level counselor trainees at the University of Education, Winneba, in Ghana. However, the study could not identify previous supportive or contradictory studies to this finding.

## 5. Limitations

Like any other study, this study limits itself to some factors. The instruments used are self-report standardized questionnaires. Since such tools have limitations, including dishonesty, they tend to exhibit social desirability bias. Though the study employed a survey to elicit a high response rate, it is limited to only the masters-level counselor trainees studying on sandwich mode due to logistical, time and financial constraints. An integrated population of undergraduate and graduate counselor trainees with various study modes at the university could have instigated some superrich contended findings since their sociodemographic statuses could have varied extensively. A significant limitation of this study is the small comparison group sample sizes in the *t*-test analysis. Comparatively, de Winter (2013) asserted that a paired *t*-test in a study with a small sample size is feasible. Also, a longitudinal study could have enriched the study findings with the dynamics of the construct throughout the study period of a counselor trainee. However, the study employed a cross-sectional design to gather the study information at one point in time. Finally, respondents from different universities nationwide could have broadened the findings and characterized the study within varied Ghanaian contexts.

## 6. Recommendations

Counselors, educators and trainees should view emotional intelligence as an emerging skill in modern counseling. Thus, it should be an integrated component in counselor training and post-training workshops where applicable. Since the results of emotional intelligence training are not instantaneous, it should be a routine activity for the entire duration of training a counselor. Tailored emotional intelligence trainable skills and concepts could be valuable in counselor trainees' wellness, mental health, and effectiveness in practicum. It could assist counselors, trainees and educators in peer supporting, overcoming practicum challenges and professional practice. Such skills and concepts could propel counselor trainees to manage their stresses and improve their empathetic relationships with clients and among themselves.

It is eminent that counselor trainees should often perform an introspective self-assessment to identify their stressors, fatigue, and burnout. That is the appropriate means of consequentially dealing with them. Also, they must be proactive when prioritizing schedules relating to their academic, practicum, social and family life. Counselor trainees need to remind themselves that in caregiving, the caregiver may also need the help of a caregiver at a point in time. Thus, signs of despair should drive them to seek support from colleagues, educators and supervisors. The university counseling center does not serve only students from other departments but also

counselor trainees. Thus, they need to visit the counseling center for psychological help. Eminently, seeking mentorship reduces uncertainties, dysfunction, and underperformance.

Counselor educators should inculcate policies for regulating stress in the framework of counselor training in universities. It will be a proponent for stress management programs for counselor trainees to assist them in relieving their stressors while they journey towards the care profession. Also, it will lead to organizing stress workshops, seminars, and stress reduction trips, such as excursions and sightseeing for counselor trainees.

Reviewed literature suggests that varied training methods enhance empathic skills, though it may not originate from an individual's predisposition to behave empathically. Thus, it is prudent for counselor educators to structure appropriate empathy training modules. Such training modules should inculcate behavioral, cognitive and affective mechanisms for change to enhance counselor trainees' empathetic tendencies. Counselor trainees, particularly women, older counselor trainees above 35 years and fresh counselor trainees in year one, should adopt self-training strategies to drive their self-motivation towards self-autonomy and empathetic drives. Counselor trainees must also resolve to manage their distress in practicum to enhance their self-efficacy in counseling.

The study findings indicate that demographic variables affect counselor trainees' emotional intelligence levels, stress and empathy. And also, the relationships among those constructs. Thus, in shaping the constructs in counselor trainees, sociodemographic characteristics must be a prudential factor for consideration. As stated earlier, women, older counselor trainees above age 35, and fresh counselor trainees in year one reported relatively lower mean scores. Thus, in supporting counselor trainees to improve and maintain very high emotional intelligence levels, women, older counselor trainees above age 35, and fresh counselor trainees are focal considerations. It is also imperative that the policies for regulating stress will be adequately geared towards women, young and fresh counselor trainees to aid them in developing resilience against stress. Based on the mean total scores obtained by the counselor trainees, women, young and new counselor trainees tend to be more stressed. Overtly, counselor trainees, particularly women, older counselor trainees above 35 years and fresh counselor trainees in year one, should adopt self-training strategies to drive their self-motivation towards self-autonomy and empathetic drives. Counselor trainees must also resolve to manage their distress in practicum to enhance their self-efficacy in counseling.

The findings that a correlation exists between emotional stress and empathy, and jointly, emotional intelligence and stress levels predict empathy levels attest to the gap in counselor training that needs filling. Thus, counselor educators and researchers need to develop new theories to expand the tenets of counselor training. In this cadence, a systematic emphasis on a comprehensive wellness (physical, mental wellness and spiritual) program is a cadre to a universally sound counselor trainee.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study explored the relationships between emotional intelligence, stress and empathy among counselor trainees. Its finding builds on existing knowledge that inspires future research into counselor trainees' well-being and progress in training. The study findings also provide several implications that guide counselor trainees and educators in emerging challenges and approaches towards counselor training.

The stress levels reported by counselor trainees propel an enquiry by counselor educators into the stressors that contribute to such stress levels. That can ensure a successful stress management construct aimed at developing stress resilience or coping mechanisms among counselor trainees. The findings also admonished counselor trainees to identify acceptable coping measures for their stresses. Considering the role of empathy in counseling, this study found that emotional intelligence scores positively correlate with and predict empathy scores. Thus, an indication is that training activities in the counseling curriculum could assist in addressing counselor trainees' emotional intelligence. Furthermore, the novel finding that emotional intelligence, together with

stress, predicts empathy impels counselor educators to include in the curriculum a construct that trains counselor trainees on emotional intelligence, stress management and empathetic tendencies concurrently.

### 8. Suggestions for Future Research

Considering the limitation that this study has a small comparison group sample size, this study suggests that a future similar study with a similar sample size could consider other parametric or nonparametric analyses for the group comparison. Imperatively, research studies should consider all the cohorts of counselor trainees at the University of Education, Winneba or a particular university. Also, future research should consider respondents from different counselor training institutions in a replica study. Further, future research studies should consider using a multivariate statistical analysis technique to estimate the multiple and interrelated dependence between emotional intelligence, stress and empathy. Finally, studying how the three constructs may reflect the total well-being of counselor trainees could instigate a new academic and literary discourse.

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**Declaration of interest:** No conflict of interest is declared by authors.

**Ethics declaration:** The study does not require an Ethics Committee Approval per the regulations of the University of education, Winneba, Ghana. However, the study complies with the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) Research Ethics Policy and the UEW Policies for Postgraduate Students (UPPS).

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