ABSTRACT

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Organizational training transfer refers to the ability of training participants to transfer skills learned in training back into the workplace. Previous research has come primarily from the fields of human resources and organizational development and has relied heavily on post-training evaluations and survey instruments. This qualitative study expands our understanding of the training transfer experience in two ways. Framing training as a social innovation, Rogers’ (1983) theory of diffusion of innovation is used to determine how aspects of the training itself and participants’ attitudes toward the training material facilitate the transfer process. The study specifically investigates two exploratory research questions: 1) How do trainee narratives describe the experience of skill transfer? and 2) In what ways are participant experiences of transfer compatible or incompatible with the major themes of the training program? These questions were investigated through interviews of training participants before, during, and three months after mediation training as well as observation of the week-long training and an analysis of the training materials. Thematic analysis of participant interviews highlighted important perspectives of what happens in the transfer process. Three dominant themes included participants’ motivation for transfer, need for communication skills, and the training-to-practice gap. These were highly (although not completely) compatible with the training themes, which included listen to both parties, address emotion, acquire communication skills, practice skills, and attend to work environment. The study has implications for theoretical development of training transfer and practical implications for training design and evaluation.
Lost in Transfer: How Training Participant Narratives Reveal Training Transfer Experiences

by
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my beautiful boys; you were the only ones who didn’t ask why.

Hard work will help you reach your dreams.

I love you more than anything else in this world; YOU are my greatest accomplishments.
BIOGRAPHY

Melinda Leonardo has served as a teaching assistant in the Communication department at North Carolina State University while pursuing her doctorate in Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media. During her studies she simultaneously interned with American Support (Cary, NC) conducting research and analysis for the Leadership Academy and Executive Council.

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INTRODUCTION

*Most corporations die prematurely from learning disabilities. They are unable to adapt and evolve as the world around them changes.*

(Arie de Geus, Royal Dutch Shell)

It is well-established that organizations, as all social systems, must adapt to the internal and external environment in order to survive. Employee training programs are one mechanism organizations use to manage adaptation. The question of how successfully employee training programs promote the desired innovations is, therefore, an important area for organizational communication research. Employee training programs are an essential part of professional development. Training outcomes range from employee orientation and knowledge of organizational processes to enhancing specific skill sets such as technology use, marketing, or managing conflicts. According to the American Society for Training and Development’s State of the Industry 2013 report, $164 billion was spent worldwide on organizational training in 2012. The following year, Forbes reported that US spending in corporate training grew by 15% to over $70 billion and over $130 billion worldwide (Bersin, 2014). Despite the escalating amounts of money spent on training each year and the extensive training research conducted over the last couple of decades, it is estimated that 87-90% of training investment is still lost in the transfer of training skills back to the job (Saks, 2002). Over time, these statistics become even more concerning. Saks (2002) found that “based on a survey of training professionals, 40% of trainees fail to transfer immediately after training, 70% falter in transfer 1 year after the program, and ultimately only 50% of training investments result in organizational or individual improvements” (p. 639). Edwards
and Nicoll (2006) portray this conundrum when they describe that once training has ended “the professional is positioned in the complex and messy world of practice where decisions and judgments have to be made, often on an instant basis. Hot action rather than deliberation in the cool spaces after the event often characterizes professional practice” (p. 122). This may result in the breakdown of skill transfer from training sessions to the workplace. These findings suggest that we have more to learn about what happens between the training and the return to the workplace where the learned skills are supposed to transfer.

Baldwin and Ford’s seminal work on training transfer (1988), defined transfer as both how the learned knowledge or skill may be applied in settings other than those experienced in training and how changes from those learned skills are maintained over time. Recent studies on transfer have developed a more conventional view of this definition as “the extent to which learned outcomes - learned off the job - are used in [transferred to] the workplace” (Cheng & Hampson, 2008, p. 329). The transfer process is described in terms of training-input factors, training outcomes, and conditions of transfer. The conditions of transfer include both the (1) generalization of material learned in training to the job context and (2) maintenance of the learned material over a period of time on the job.

Much of the research on training transfer seeks to understand the factors that influence the transfer, yet few scholars have made a connection between transfer and the diffusion of innovations. Rogers’ (1983) diffusion of innovations (DOI) is widely cited across many disciplines in studies about how social and technical innovations are adopted in groups, communities, cultures, and organizations. Since the skills learned in training may be seen as an organizational innovation, this theory should have implications for understanding
training transfer. To date, two studies in the organizational training field have drawn upon Rogers’ DOI as a framework for studying transfer (Gilpin-Jackson & Bushe, 2007 and Kohles, Bligh, & Carsten, 2013). Gilpin-Jackson and Bushe examined factors which may influence transfer of leadership (soft skill) training. The results of their exploratory study (from surveys of 18 training participants) found numerous variables that facilitated positive transfer including social support, adoption environment, continuity and maintenance, and situational context. Of these variables, only one, the adoption environment factor, was discussed in relation to its similarities with the characteristics of an innovation. Kohles et al. (2013) examined diffusion of innovation in the context of a training designed to integrate a new organizational vision into the culture. Survey results from 1400 employees found that the characteristics of an innovation reflect how the organizational vision was perceived. These studies show the utility of DOI for the study of training transfer, but examining transfer from a communication perspective using the established characteristics of an innovation will offer an opportunity to investigate transfer through a different lens.

The communication perspective of this study also contributes a new methodology for examining training transfer. Previous studies of transfer have relied heavily on surveys, which are limited in scope and detail about the training transfer experience. Through a narrative approach, the current study seeks to gather training participant narratives in order to obtain a richer, deeper collection of data regarding perceptions of the transfer experience. As Weick (1995) indicates, “narratives are when people punctuate their own living into [sic] stories, they impose a formal coherence on what is otherwise a flowing soup” (p. 60). The narratives of training participants thus offer important perspectives of their experience with
transfer. Narratives will be defined in the participant interviews through the presence of three basic elements: an original state of affairs, an action or event, and a consequent state of affairs (Czarniawska, 1998).

Early research on organizational training often focused on task performance (for the industrial, military, and manufacturing fields) where the jobs require exact performance of a specific skill (Cannon-Bowers, Salas, Tannenbaum, & Mathieu, 1995), but increasing numbers of studies have begun to address the need for a better understanding of what training literature describes as soft-skill training and the challenges of skill transfer beyond the training environment. Soft skills are typically defined as interpersonal skills that encompass attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors. While the training literature makes the distinction between soft and hard skills, I propose the term “social skills,” as these types of skills require knowledge of technical terms and ideas as well as interpersonal practice. I will use this terminology throughout the rest of this work. To continue to build upon research of social-skill training transfer, this study examines training for one specific social skill: conflict management. Conflicts can be seen as nearly any organizational friction that produces a mismatch in expectations of the proper course of action for an employee or group of employees. Conflicts do not always lead to disputes; sometimes they are ignored, sometimes suppressed, and sometimes deemed unimportant enough to be left alone. Disputes are a subset of the conflicts that require resolution, activated by the filing of a grievance, a lawsuit against an organization, or even a simple written complaint. (Lipsky, Seeber, & Fincher, 2003, p. 8)
Once seen as primarily negative, attitudes towards conflict within organizations saw a shift in the early 1990’s as researchers began to discuss the positive outcomes associated with “healthy” conflict. Conflict began to be seen as an opportunity for promoting deeper discussion, a first step in brainstorming and creativity while working with others, and an opportunity for groups to learn how to work and find solutions together. Whether conflict is seen as negative or positive, it remains a significant factor in the daily operations of all organizations. Training programs associated with managing organizational conflict are, therefore, a significant, and relatively unstudied, context of training transfer. Understanding Recognizing the role conflict plays in the organizational culture and in the success of organizations and their members, it is essential that more research specifically address the transfer of conflict management training skills. How is this innovation being adopted and/or experienced by employees? It does not make sense to invest in conflict training intervention if the skills do not transfer.

Training to manage conflict in organizations has taken different forms over the years. For example, it has helped to educate trainees on alternative dispute resolution techniques, assisted in the integration of dispute system designs, helped individuals to recognize and understand the different conflict management styles, provided instruction for conflict coaching, and trained individuals to mediate conflicts, a method that has gained popularity in recent years (Bendersky, 1998; Brinkert, 2011; Burrell, Zirbel, & Allen, 2003; Bush & Folger, 2004; Cloke & Goldsmith, 2000; Constantino, 2009; Friedman, Tidd, Currall, & Tsai, 2000; Liberman, Levy, & Segal, 2009; Lipsky, et. al., 2003; Nabatchi, Bingham, & Moon, 2010; Rahim, 2002; Shockley-Zalabak, 1984). Because mediation recognizes and focuses on
relationships involved in the conflict, organizations have rapidly accepted the process of mediation as a legitimate and successful means of managing organizational conflict. The concept of mediation stands in contrast to the previous suggestions by some conflict management researchers to separate the people from the problem, to focus on the content of the conflict rather than the relationship (Nabatchi, et. al., 2010). Instead, mediation training takes on the particularly difficult task of focusing on the relationships and the emotions that are involved in those relationships. Mediation has become a popular method for managing organizational conflicts because it helps managers to be more effective leaders and mediation participants are more satisfied with the results of a mediation process than the often ongoing issues that remain in unresolved conflicts (Bush & Folger, 2004; Bodtker & Jameson, 2001; Jameson, Bodtker, Porch, & Jordan, 2010; Nabatchi, et al, 2010).

Mediation training provides an interesting context to study because trainees must learn new skills that enable them to improve their own social skills in conflict management and then transfer the skill (the innovation of mediation processes) as a new method to managing the social skills of current organizational members. Other members of the organization may or may not adopt the innovation, but the trainees have worked to learn new skills with the expectation that this innovation will be a positive improvement to their work environment.

This study makes an important contribution to the understanding of training transfer through both the context of mediation training and the method of examining training transfer from the perspective of individual training participants. This study investigates two exploratory research questions: 1) How do trainee narratives describe the experience of skill
transfer? and 2) In what ways are participant experiences of transfer compatible or incompatible with the major themes of the training program?

To help position the current research, there will be a review of the previous work in training and training transfer, conflict, and mediation training in chapter two. Conceptual foundations will also be established with a review of the diffusion of innovations theory. Chapter three lays out the methodological framework for the study and introduces the study background and participants. Chapter four presents the study results: three dominant themes which emerged within the participant interviews and important overlaps between these themes and characteristics of an innovation in response to the first research question. Major themes that have emerged in the training materials will also be presented. In response to the second research question, the major themes from the training materials will be compared to the major themes from the participant interviews. The fifth and final chapter will discuss noteworthy compatibilities and one incompatibility between the participant and training themes and the important implications and limitations of the study.
LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand the current status of organizational training research, this chapter will review the previous work that has been completed in the organizational training and transfer fields. Rogers’ (1983) diffusion of innovations (DOI) will be examined to provide the theoretical foundation for this study. Finally, I will present an overview of research on social skills training, including conflict management and mediation, to provide more background on the specific training context of this study.

Organizational Training

Significant research has been conducted on the concept of training since the 1960’s. For the purposes of this study, training will be defined using Awoniyi, Griego, and Morgan’s (2002) concise definition: training is “an intervention directed at increasing an employee's knowledge, skills, and attitude in the workplace…the use of training is to achieve a 'fit' between the person and the requirements of the job” (p. 25). Organizations spend billions of dollars each year on training and professional/organizational development opportunities for employees with the expectation that training will result in changes to employee behavior. Kirkpatrick’s (1976) training model served as the field’s seminal work to conceptualize training, followed two decades later by the foundational work by Baldwin and Ford (1988) who established the concept of training transfer and a model of the transfer process. They defined the concept of transfer as consisting of two major dimensions: (a) generalization—the extent to which the knowledge and skill acquired in a learning setting are applied to different settings, people, and/or situations from those trained, and (b) maintenance—the extent to
which changes that result from a learning experience persist over time. (Baldwin & Ford, 1988, p. 72)

Baldwin and Ford’s (1988) model of transfer breaks the transfer process into three distinct areas concerning input factors associated with training, the outcomes of training, and the circumstances of maintaining training transfer. Since then, across the disciplines of business and management, human resource development, psychology, communication, and adult education, training continues to have a significant place in the ongoing scholarly discussions. Organizations and individuals continue to appreciate the significant impact the different areas of training have on organizations’ productivity, organizational culture, and individual experience within the organization. A review of recent work in these areas establishes what we have learned in the field of organizational training.

Research in organizational training tends to fall within one of the three core areas of the transfer process model established by Baldwin and Ford (1988) - training input factors, training outcomes, and conditions of transfer.
The three core areas of the training model address different factors in the training experience. Input factors include training design, trainee characteristics, and work environment characteristics such as support and the opportunity to use skills learned in training. Training design factors include learning principles and sequence of the training sessions, while trainee characteristics include the ability/skill, motivation, and personality factors of individual trainee participants. Work-environment characteristics include climate (both supervisor and peer support) and the varying levels of opportunities or lack thereof to use the learned behaviors back on the job.
Training outcomes examine the original learning that takes place during training and after the completion of the programs, specifically how the training material is retained. Conditions of transfer include both the generalization of learned material to the job and the maintenance of trained skills over a period of time on the job (Baldwin & Ford, 1988).

**Training input factors.** The first subset of training research focuses on training input factors (trainee characteristics, training design, and work environment), which examines what individuals bring to the training experience and how this may or may not affect the individual’s response to training programs. Studies in this area measure how individual characteristics, from pre-training motivation to post-training transfer, affect the overall success of training programs (Chiaburu & Marinova, 2005; Colquitt, LePine, & Noe, 2000; Foxon, 1993). Pintrich, Cross, Kozma, and McKeachie (1986) established the movement towards focus on the individual trainee in research: “where instructional psychology dealt primarily with issues of instructional design, it is now recognized that learners bring prior knowledge and cognitive skills and the largest influences are individual intelligence and motivation” (p. 612). Individual (non-design) factors include pre-training motivation, personality, and cognitive ability. The theoretical frameworks that ground many of the studies in this area of organizational training focus primarily on the role of the individual. Grossman and Salas’ (2011) review of training research determined trainee characteristics “that have shown the strongest most consistent relationships with transfer include cognitive ability, self-efficacy, motivation, and perceived utility of training” (p. 106). Their analysis continues to support Ford (2009), who claimed that when individuals were more motivated to
learn in advance of attending the training sessions they were more likely to perceive success in the use of trained skills.

Trainee motivation specifically has been examined to measure whether “1) high effort will lead to high performance in training, 2) high performance in training will lead to high job performance, and 3) high job performance is instrumental in obtaining desired outcomes and avoiding undesirable outcomes” (Mathieu, Tannenbaum, & Salas, 1992, p. 833). Conclusions from much of this research indicate that those trainees who are motivated to learn will be more likely to practice the learned skills (Weissbein, Huang, Ford, & Schmidt, 2011).

Similarly, the training and human resource fields are filled with scholarly discussions about training design and whether certain design elements and aspects of training agendas affect the “success” of a training program (Meyer & Marsick, 2003). These findings are based on surveys of training participants.

Silberman’s (2006) research on active training serves as a seminal work that addresses how adult learners become engaged in active learning, moving beyond training sessions that are simply instructors operating in a show-and-tell sequence of information. Active training suggests that learning activities are most effective when the participants move beyond the receipt of information and are able to acquire knowledge instead (Silberman, 2006). In active training, programs are designed to allow participants to hear information, see information, question and discuss information, and do and teach activities/skills associated with that information. The process involves attention to affective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects of learning using a three-pronged approach that fosters attitudes, allows for the
development and practice of skills, and promotes understanding of the concepts behind the training subject (Silberman, 2006).

Just as Silberman’s work focuses on design elements, other researchers in the study of training design place heavy emphasis on the learning activities. For example, coaches and trainers often include the popular training design element of role-play in conflict and mediation training programs. Research has shown the advantages these types of interactions may provide to trainees in the simulation of scenarios where the trainee’s knowledge can be put to use.

Researchers draw upon social learning theory (Burke & Day, 1986; Sulsky & Kline, 2007) in the discussion of trainee learning, suggesting that trainee skills can be enhanced when trainees are: (1) introduced to the topic, (2) provided with a model to observe, (3) given the chance to perfect new skills, and (4) given feedback on the skills learned (Wexley & Latham, 1991). Role-play activities meet all of these criteria for more effective learning opportunities and are, therefore, a popular interactive training design mechanism. White and Agne’s (2009) qualitative discourse analysis of 26 role-played sessions confirmed the positive perception of role-play opportunities in training, reporting increased satisfaction with these opportunities for actual practice of skills. White and Agne’s (2009) study made an important contribution since the majority of research on training designs (such as role plays) had relied primarily on quantitative methods for measuring the effectiveness of the design elements.

The use of role-play designs in training programs, however, raises the important question of whether design elements in training can be identical to the actual work
environment and, if this is possible, whether these designs will assist in the facilitation of learning. Edwards and Nicoll (2006) warn against the weight that is sometimes placed on role-play designs in the evaluation of success:

- demonstrations that [a participant] can do something in the context of practice or in simulations of practice become a key signifier of professionalism, but the professional is positioned in the complex and messy world of practice where decisions and judgments have to be made, often on an instant basis. Hot action rather than deliberation in the cool spaces after the event often characterizes professional practice. (Edwards & Nicoll, p. 211)

Ford (2009) suggests four changes to training design elements that she believes will improve the chances of training transfer in the workplace environment. These design elements include the creation of sessions, like role plays, where 1) the objective is defined and realistic; 2) the pre-training communication from trainers informs the trainees how they may be expected to use the skills learned from the training; 3) the design builds upon the concept of active learning; and 4) training participants are held accountable for putting their trained skills to use.

The concept of legitimate peripheral participation is similar in many ways to Silberman’s concept of active training and the design goal of providing the opportunity for acquisition of knowledge rather than receipt of knowledge. This concept is discussed in numerous disciplines of research, including the education and medical fields, and speaks directly to how learning can be achieved in practice environments (Hasrati, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991; O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Spouse, 1998; Woodgate-Jones, 2012). Lave
(1988) described legitimate peripheral participation as a threefold process that “1) enables newcomers to enter the world of old-timers, and 2) to engage in progressive and increasingly complex activities whilst 3) also developing identity as a member of the community” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 1-20).

While legitimate peripheral participation has been discussed in the classroom environment, it has clear implications for training more broadly defined. Designing learning activities such as training programs with the understanding that human learning is context-dependent and socially-mediated provides exposure to professional practice and the experiences of practitioners in the reality of the workplace. These types of learning experiences enable students (trainees) to identify further learning needs as well as provide a basis for integrating their classroom or formal learning with the informal knowledge-in-use by practitioners (Spouse, 1998, p. 346).

One way in which training research has addressed the complexity of daily practice is through training-design research that focuses on the work environment (Clarke, 2002). Surveys administered to training participants shortly after the completion of training have examined what factors in the work environment affect the transfer of skills (Awoniyi, et al., 2002; Baldwin, Ford, Blume, & Huang, 2010; Brinkerhoff & Gill, 1992). Supervisor and peer support and the organizational climate are major factors for transfer within the work environment. Studies have also found that organizations rarely create spaces for employees to practice trained skills before or after training (Colquitt et al., 2000; Saks & Belcourt, 2006; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001). This barrier to training transfer is exacerbated by the lack of supervisor and/or peer support, as Brinkerhoff and Gill (1994) describe: “peer pressure to
conform to pre-existing norms [is] the bane of transfer of training: the workplace can untrain people far more efficiently than even the best training department can train people” (p. 9).

**Training output factors.** Training output factors are the second subset of training research and include learning factors and retention of learned skills. Research in this area focuses largely on learning outcomes which are categorized well in Silberman’s three major types of learning goals, reviewed as the ABC’s of learning: affective, behavioral, and cognitive. Affective learning goals foster attitudes, feelings, and preferences, which are the priority when there is a lack of knowledge, or a “don't know” situation. Behavioral learning goals include the development of competence in the actual performance of procedures, operations, methods, and techniques, which are the priority when there is a lack of skill, or a “can't do” situation. Cognitive learning goals focus on the acquisition of information and concepts related to course content, which are a priority when there is a lack of desire or fear about using knowledge or skills: a “won't do” situation (Silberman, 2006).

Early work on retention of trained skills in the military and technology-related disciplines focused on whether a specific task could be replicated as the primary assessment of retention (Cannon-Bowers, et. al., 1995; Thayer & Teachout, 1995; Velada, Caetano, Michel, Lyons, & Kavanagh, 2007). But as training programs have developed to address social skills in addition to specific task-related skills, the ability to measure retention has been problematic. The concept of transfer itself encompasses the ability to retain and use skills learned in the training; therefore, the majority of studies in training transfer focus to some degree on retention. These discussions incorporate whether learning principles might improve retention of skills and how both individual and organizational factors may affect
overall retention. Retention is often discussed as utilization of skills (Cannon-Bowers et al., 1995; Saks & Belcourt, 2006; Holton, Cheng, & Naquin, 2003; Mulili & Wong, 2011). In 2009, Burke and Saks raised an interesting point about accountability for the retention and utilization of skills after training. Their review of transfer research found that a specific method for guaranteeing successful transfer had yet to be determined and as such that it may be more appropriate to address the accountability for the retention of skills as it pertains to managers, trainees, and trainers.

**Conditions of transfer.** Although employees may gain new knowledge and skills through training programs, learning alone is not sufficient for training to be considered effective (Chiaburu & Marinova, 2005). The transfer of training serves as the third area of the training model process and a robust and intensive area of research within the training literature. Baldwin and Ford (1988) specify the two major dimensions of transfer as generalization and maintenance. Generalization involves more than mimicking trained responses to events that occurred in training, because it requires trainees to exhibit trained behaviors in response to different settings, people, and situations from those trained. The issue of training transfer rose to the forefront of research concerns when the majority of companies surveyed described no follow-up with trainees (Michalak, 1981; Saari, Johnson, McLaughlin, & Zimmerle, 1988). There was no evidence to show that skills learned in training were being generalized or that training programs were perceived as effective and/or useful over time. Decades later, in 2002, Awoniyi, et al. found an estimated 87-90% loss of skill in the transfer to the job after training. Saks and Belcourt (2006) reported that approximately 10% of learned skills are utilized back in the workplace. Despite extensive
Research on training input factors and training design and learning elements, the issue of transfer and the retention of skills learned in training remains a significant and critical issue for trainees, organizations, and the training industry; “while learning principles might improve learning and retention, they generally do not address constraints in the post-training environment that can inhibit the transfer of training” (Saks & Belcourt, 2006, p. 634).

Training design factors that have the strongest relationships with transfer include behavior modeling and a realistic training environment. The most critical components of the work environment include transfer climate, support, opportunity, and follow-up (Grossman & Salas, 2011). Other factors that play a role in the transfer discussion include, but are not limited to, trainee personality, job and career variables, cognitive ability, and demographics, (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Colquitt, et al., 2002; Weissbein, et al., 2011).

In 2002, Clarke conducted a qualitative study that examined training transfer within the work settings of a human services organization. Observations of an in-service training followed by training evaluation surveys found that factors of the organizational environment such as peer support played an important role in whether or not the training participants perceived their ability to use the learned skills. In the training evaluation surveys, trainees also indicated severely insufficient duration of the training program for the mastery of skills and the subsequent use back on the job. These findings support Baldwin and Ford’s (1988) claims about the importance of opportunities to use training skills in the workplace and the need for social support from managers and colleagues.

Additionally, through follow up surveys with trainees, Nikandrou, Brinia, and Bereri (2009) found that “one year after the training, almost all of the trainees expressed their
disappointment as they did not manage to transfer the training to their work” (p. 263).

Contrary to researchers’ expectations, even trainees who indicated a pre-training motivation and were actively thinking about transferring skills to their workplace during the training reported “only a small percentage or even nothing at all” (p. 263) in response to questions about how much they experienced transfer of trained skills back to the reality of their workplace situations. The primary method for measuring transfer continues to be the use of surveys; to simply ask an individual if they have used the skills they learned in training back at work misses the true intent of transfer (Overmyer-Day & Benson, 1996). Cheng and Hampson (2008) confirm that “our understanding of real transfer issues is incomplete” (328).

In 2001, Salas and Cannon-Bowers wondered whether training practitioners were applying what had been learned from training research. In addition to what we understand about the concept of transfer, Kopp addressed another aspect of transfer, making a bold claim in 2006 that transfer of trained skills seemed to be viewed as nice to have, but that few if any stakeholders, especially trainers, are held accountable for evidence of transfer success in a meaningful way. He argued that perhaps trainers fear trainees are not transferring from their programs, perhaps trainers are not asked by top line managers to provide transfer evidence, perhaps managers do not know how to hold their employees accountable for transfer, and/or perhaps trainees, supervisors, and/or trainers do not want to shoulder the responsibility (in Burke & Saks, 2009, p. 387).

Hutchins and Burke (2007) suggest that a lack of emphasis in supporting training transfer might be attributed to an imbalance between the resources provided by firms for each phase of the instructional design process and the actual value each phase contributes to
sustained performance improvement. Specifically, the author’s study estimated that “85\% of training resources are dedicated to designing and delivering training, with the remaining 15\% divided between analysis and follow-up [i.e., transfer and evaluation] activities” (p. 238).

Without building in the importance of transfer, it would appear that success in adopting the learned skills is not considered a priority by the larger organization. Taking steps to improve the current organizational perspective on training transfer may assist in raising the priority level. If organizations viewed training more as an innovation for the organization as a whole rather than individual professional development or simple enhancement of skills, the process of transfer and the motivation to achieve successful transfer of trained skills would be of higher priority. If organizations framed their training as the diffusion and adoption of an innovation (the trained skills), the consideration given to transfer may be much different. Organizations could potentially see the advantages for budgeting and resources that specifically support the adoption of the innovation – the successful transfer of skills.

In recent years, two studies have made the link between DOI and training transfer. Gilpin-Jackson and Bushe’s 2007 examination of leadership development training and, more recently, Kohles et. al’s (2013) examination of management skills using DOI.

Gilpin-Jackson and Bushe’s (2007) study set out to examine the utilization of soft skills (leadership training). The study’s review of literature helped to determine five broad factors that may influence transfer of skills in leadership training. These factors were then used to construct interview guides and survey questions for an exploratory study of a leadership development program. Results of the study found that a skill was “most transferred” if the trainees included a direct reference to having used the leadership skills.
Only one of Rogers’ DOI characteristics was highlighted in their results: the adoption environment as a variable that facilitates positive transfer was compared to Rogers’ concept of observability.

Gilpin-Jackson and Bushe explained that when the work environment was characterized by acceptance and listening, trainees perceived that the trained skills would be accepted in the organizational environment. In this case trainees were more likely to use the skills from training. The authors used Rogers’ concept of observability to explain the importance of the adoption environment in skill transfer. Interestingly, Rogers’ (1983) discussion of observability has more to do with seeing a skill in practice than a perceived acceptance of the skill from colleagues and supervisors. The findings of this study appear to provide more support for Rogers’ notion of compatibility, which describes the importance of making sure the innovation is compatible with the organizational culture. This discrepancy in interpretation is difficult to unpack when the primary method of data collection is survey question responses. Much more detail is needed from the study participants to understand what is happening in the adoption environment.

The second training study to make use of Rogers’ (1983) DOI was Kohles et al.’s (2013) examination of the adoption of a specific organization’s vision. Similar to Gilpin-Jackson and Bushe (2007), Kohles et al. also recognized “that understanding how ideas diffuse through social systems, and what factors influence that process, has numerous applications to organizations attempting to disseminate new practices, training programs, ideas, and technologies” (p. 470). In their study, innovation characteristics were measured with a five-item scale that asked respondents to rate each of the five innovation
characteristics (relative advantage, trialability, compatibility, complexity, and observability); examples of questions for innovation characteristics included: “There is a clear advantage to using the vision as a guide for my work behaviors and decisions” and “The vision is compatible with my work behaviors and decisions” (Kohles et al., 2013, p. 475). Findings indicated that, despite being educated on the vision of the organization, there was not a direct correlation between vision knowledge and integration of the vision into trainees’ jobs.

While Rogers’ innovation characteristics helped determine whether employee perceptions about the organizational vision were then integrated into employee communication, this study did not address training that dealt with employee behavior or performance. The authors also acknowledged that findings were based on trainees’ self-ratings of their understanding of the vision, which may or may not have been inflated. The format of the survey questions and answers is also limited in that it does not provide any information on how the trainees have experienced the innovation characteristics. Better understanding of the trainee experience in the organizational environment could build upon these earlier studies and make a more meaningful connection between the training transfer and DOI literatures. In response to these authors’ calls for continued research in this area, this study will employ the diffusion of innovations to help further examine how the new skills or behavioral innovations diffused through mediation training are experienced by training participants and transferred to their organizational environments.

Training Skills as an Innovation

The concept of an innovation is not new within the field of organizational research; studies have examined what is needed to integrate innovations such as new technologies and
personnel programs. Rogers’ (1983) seminal work on DOI has been used as a framework in countless studies across the fields of agriculture, science, anthropology, and business. Therefore it is surprising to find that DOI has rarely been considered in the field of training and training transfer. Although there is a seemingly obvious parallel between training transfer and the concept of DOI, research addressing these connections is limited.

Rogers’ (1983) DOI explains how new ideas or technologies, in this case trained skills, spread through an organization and/or system. Rogers defines diffusion as “the process by which (1) an innovation (2) is communicated through certain channels (3) over time (4) among the members of a social system” (p.11). Training is an intervention directed at increasing individual capacity or encouraging employees to adopt new knowledge, skills, and attitudes in the workplace. Specifically, mediation training is an intervention intended to change an individual’s behavior from their current practice to a desired practice or set of skills. As individuals attempt to adopt the skills they have learned in mediation training, there are obviously levels of uncertainty about the newness of these skills, their acceptance by other members of the organization, and their success rate.

**Characteristics of adoption.** Rogers (1983) uncovers five core variables that explain the variation that occurs in the process of an innovation’s adoption. These characteristics are summarized in order to provide a review of the variables and their similarities to elements of training transfer.

According to Rogers “an innovation is defined as an idea, practice, or objective perceived as new by an individual, a group, or an organization” (p. 17) and may range in involvement from a very high degree to a very low degree of new knowledge. The five
characteristics of an innovation that are used to assess its diffusion potential include relative advantage (is the innovation better than the idea it replaced), trialability (can you experiment with the innovation and the extent to which the adopter must commit to full adoption), compatibility (the fit of the innovation to established ways of accomplishing the same goal, consistency with the existing values and needs of the user), complexity (how simple the innovation is to understand and use), and observability (are the results visible to others), (Rogers, 1983; Kohles et al., 2013).

The concept of relative advantage is defined as the strength of outcomes received as a result of adoption of an innovation (Rogers, 1983). Organizational members have to decide whether incorporating the skill as a guide for their behavior will likely provide some benefit for them in terms of performing their jobs compared to previous guiding frameworks they may have used (i.e., is it even worth it as compared to other available options). (Kohles et al., 2013, p. 471)

In terms of training transfer, the parallel definition for relative advantage can be the benefits that accrue to the trainee as a result of using the training at work (Gilpin-Jackson & Bushe, 2007). Those individuals who are more highly motivated to attend training sessions may perceive more relative advantage to the transfer of learned skills (Colquitt, et al., 2000; Grossman & Salas, 2011). Support for this connection is found in training literature from the field of technology and computer science. Karahanna, Ahuja, Srite, and Galvin (2001) looked at whether group support systems for employees were perceived as having an advantage over the more traditional face-to-face meetings. Similarly, Shammot (2014) found that organizational members (and managers) measured the value of soft-skill training programs
according to the competitive advantage they believed the training would provide them when they returned to the workplace. Individuals who perceived a higher value of the training program in advance typically reported more success in what they believed to be the use of skills they had learned from the training programs.

Trialability is the degree to which an innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis. Greater trialability increases the diffusion process because it allows for less uncertainty to the individual through the opportunity to learn by doing (Rogers, 1983). Transfer research has similarly concluded that when environments encourage post-training practice of skills, there are greater perceptions of successful skills transfer. Supportive environments may include features such as encouragement from supervisors and coworkers, supervisor understanding of the new skill, and an organizational culture that values professional development and accepts individual change and growth. If employees are able to try out skills learned in training when they return to the reality of their work environment without negative consequences (feeling ostracized by a superior or colleague, being penalized in any way for use of the new process) and without too much difficulty, then there is a much better chance for adoption of those newly learned skills (Kohles et al., 2013). However, if there are negative consequences in attempts to use skills learned in training in the workplace, it is highly unlikely that transfer will occur. The inability to “try out” an innovation, a skill learned in training, has significant impact on the diffusion of an innovation and/or the transfer of those learned skills. For example, if individuals return from training and are enthusiastic to use new marketing skills they have learned, but are told by their supervisor that there is no reason to change the marketing techniques currently in use, it is
likely that the individuals will not only set aside the new skills learned in training because they are not accepted by the supervisor, but that these skills will never be used in the work environment at all.

Additionally, elements of training design (Ford, 2009; Silberman, 2006) and decisions in training processes are closely associated with the trialability of an innovation. Transfer research has shown the advantages of both coaching and role-play scenarios in training design and how these types of interactions may provide trainees with knowledge they can put to use (Greene, 2003; White & Agne, 2009).

Compatibility is the “degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters” (Rogers, 1983, p. 15). In training, skills that are not relevant to the existing organizational culture or its approaches to managing conflict will not transfer as successfully, if at all. If the skill is perceived as compatible with prevailing norms within the organizational culture, then individuals may be more likely to identify with the transfer of those skills (Kohles et al., 2013). Internal characteristics of training participants, such as personality and pre-training motivation (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Baldwin, et al., 2010; Colquitt, et al., 2000), affect whether skills are perceived as compatible and, as a result, whether the individual believes the skills are capable of and worthwhile for transfer. Additionally, the concept of compatibility is similar to transfer discussions of the characteristics of the organizational environment – how do the post training environment, social support from colleagues, and supervisor support, for example, create an environment that is open to or compatible with the skill(s) considered for transfer? Tabada and Johnsrud (2008) examined the integration of
distance education courses at a large system of universities following training for these types of courses. The study found that faculty were more likely to integrate elements of distance education if they believed that the distance-education work style was compatible with their current work style. If differences between the two styles were too severe, the faculty members were unlikely to incorporate the new format. Similarly, Constantino (2009) and Jameson (1998) examined the integration of conflict management systems and mediation within organizations. Both authors make the point that adoption of conflict management systems is more successful when they are compatible with current processes in place within the organization.

The concept of complexity is the “degree to which an innovation is perceived as difficult to understand and use” (Rogers, 1983, p. 16). If a new process is cumbersome or if organizational members find it difficult to relate to their individual roles within the organization, adoption may be denied due to the perception that the idea is too intricate to be practical (Kohles et al., 2013). In terms of transfer, complexity relates to the trainee’s perceptions of how complicated it will be to apply the new skills to the work environment. The more complex the innovation, the more likely its diffusion is to be dependent on the motivation and personality of individual trainees (Colquitt, et al., 2000; Mathieu, et al., 1992). The concept of complexity also speaks to the training process itself; trainers who design program elements with close attention to the skills most relevant when the trainee returns to the work environment can reduce complexity.

Finally, observability is the ability to see the innovation being used by others and observe the results of that innovation prior to adoption (Gilpin-Jackson & Bushe, 2007). In
relation to transfer, this refers to the ways in which training participants are able to see others in the work environment using the skills from the training sessions. Observability “in the form of symbols, common practices, or visible behaviors, may encourage others to think about, discuss, or try to integrate the vision into their work as well” (Kohles et al., 2013, p. 471). The easier it is to observe others in the organizational environment using the skills learned in training, the better the opportunity for transfer to occur. In an evaluation of peer mediation training programs in elementary and secondary school settings, Burrell, Zirbel, and Allen (2003) found that mediation skills that students were able to observe through the demonstrations of effective peer mediations were the skills that they identified as most effective from the training.

Across the training literature there are distinct differences between training of what researchers term “hard skills” versus “soft-skills,” which, as explained in chapter 1, will be referred to as social skills in this study. Significant training research regarding hard-skill training is found in the industrial, organizational, and military fields, while research on social skill training is much less prevalent. Despite the contrast in the amount of research regarding social-skill training, it is a topic that is crucial in the daily workings of organizations. Skills to manage conflicts and other human, social issues are integral in organizational operations. Because this study examines the transfer process in the context of mediation training, a brief overview of conflict training is provided below.

**Conflict Training**

Organizations recognize that conflict is ubiquitous and can lead to innovative problem solving and improved employee relationships if managed effectively. With the
understanding that there are different types of conflict and that each organizational member comes to conflict with differing conflict styles, an important and ongoing area of research examines how organizations and organizational members manage such a difficult but critical situation within their populations (Thomas, 1976; Trudel & Reio, 2011; Van Gramberg, 2007). Initially, when conflict was viewed in a negative light, organizations and researchers sought to find ways to eliminate conflict. Conflict management systems emerged where a key factor in analysis and resolution was to take the person out of the conflict (Fisher & Ury, 1981). Emotion was seen as the wrench that could kill even the best conflict management system (Putnam & Mumby, 1993); therefore, it was suggested, recommended, and implored that managers and supervisors who were handling conflicts make every effort to take the people (and their emotionally charged approaches to conflict) out of the problems. This was believed to allow for a more clear focus on the task (conflict resolution) and would, in theory, get to the core of the issue and, as a result, a swift resolution where tasks and organizational responsibilities could again become the priority.

Over the last two decades, the pendulum has swung in the other direction, focusing much more significantly on the important role of emotions in conflict and conflict management (Bendersky, 1998; Cloke & Goldsmith, 2000; Friedman, et. al., 2000; Jameson, et. al., 2010; Jones, 2000; Kolb & Bartunek, 1992; Rahim, 2002). Conflict management training ranges from an emphasis on understanding conflict styles (Rahim, 2002; Thomas & Kilmann, 1976), to understanding different personalities (Myers-Briggs type training), to negotiation models such as principled negotiation (Brett, Goldberg, & Ury 1990, Fisher & Ury, 1991) and interventions like dispute system design and mediation (Nabatchi, et. al.,
A recent study (Jameson, et al., 2010) examines the “expression or communication of emotion – how parties in a conflict understand and discuss their own and one another’s underlying feelings about the conflict issues and how discussion of those emotions influence the conflict management outcome” (p. 169). This study found that participants in negotiations did not talk about emotion while those in mediations did, and the outcomes of the mediation processes were more transformative. While there are numerous ways to manage conflicts, training individuals to mediate conflicts emphasizes both new skills and a behavioral change (the use of third parties in a conflict). Given the need to explore underlying interests and emotions to effectively manage conflict and improve relationships and organizational climate, and due to the normative difficulties of talking about emotions in the workplace, mediation has proliferated as a popular option over the years. Important discussions of transformative mediation and conflict coaching (Jones & Brinkert, 2008; Nabatchi, et al., 2010) within this area of research have addressed the important recognition of emotions and relationships that are integrally involved in the process of mediating conflicts.

There are many types of mediation (workplace, family, environmental, etc.), but the goal of workplace mediation is to settle the interpersonal employee conflicts that arise: “workplace mediation may seek to resolve disagreements over work conditions, conflicts between employees, the reintegration of employees after a leave of absence [or] disagreements about terminations” (Bollen & Euwema, 2013, p. 331). Workplace mediations may also address (but are not limited to) complaints about sexual harassment, discrimination, and bullying. The process of mediation seeks to assist the disputants in the ability to discuss
their issues with the hope of providing a means to better understand each other’s concerns. In most mediations, the mediator encourages open communication and has no power to advise or advocate for the parties on agreements or specific outcomes; rather, the mediator helps the parties to determine what they believe to be an acceptable resolution.

Due to the heightened emotions associated with mediation processes for all of those involved, including the mediators themselves (Schreier, 2002), mediation training is of significant importance:

- a mediator’s awareness of the emotions with which he enters into the mediation, the emotions he has about the subject of the mediation itself, and emotion that the mediation generates are all pertinent to how the mediation proceeds; they are critical to maintaining the professional neutrality expected of a mediator. An upset or angry mediator who has just come in from a two-hour traffic jam or an argument with a family member, for example, must be able to process or postpone engagement of [his] own emotions to be present for the mediation, or risk unacknowledged leakage of these personal emotional reactions and disruption of [his] judgment and performance. (p. 101)

Research suggests that mediation training that helps mediators to understand and manage strong emotions builds tolerance for expression of emotion, helps to develop detachment and reduce stress, teaches mediators patience, and helps to promote a more realistic understanding of possible outcomes for the mediation (Lund, 2000). It is crucial that these types of training programs address the importance of the mediators’ emotions and provide mediators with the skills to maintain professional boundaries and impartiality while assisting
these individuals in the process of successfully transferring these skills to the reality of the mediation processes. Numerous training programs and exercises in recent years have been developed to address the skill for handling and managing the emotional content associated with mediation. Multiple training programs and exercises are designed to work through the emotion in mediation training (Schreier, 2002). Lund (2000) has also recommended role-play, trainer modeling, and videotaping to heighten awareness and practice responses to high-emotion conflict in training programs.

Although training research continues to evaluate mediation-training design, there is still a highlighted need to emphasize emotion more in training programs (Jameson et al., 2010; Schreier, 2002). Schreier’s (2002) study on emotional intelligence and mediation training found that mediators did not feel the training they had received had taught them how to tackle the emotions that are inherently involved in mediating conflicts. Mediators felt a significant gap between the skills they received in training and what mediators were experiencing in the reality of mediation practices. Implications from Jameson’s (2001) study on conflict management strategies and third-party mediation practices indicate that “if conflict is going to be confronted and managed effectively, employees must have the appropriate skills to handle this task” (p. 185). But in addition to the skills that are needed, the issue of transferring these skills is a major hurdle for trainees and organizations to overcome. Getting employees to use the mediation skills they have learned in their everyday handling of conflict communication and more formal mediation sessions should be considered a primary goal. As such, mediation training is an innovation for organizations and their employees as they continue to adjust to and adopt the skills they are learning and,
therefore, may be explored more fully drawing upon the characteristics of Rogers’ theory of diffusion of innovations.

Acknowledging the underutilization of the diffusion of innovations theory and the need for greater depth in the descriptions of transfer experiences, this study will focus more specifically on the connections between Rogers’ characteristics as they relate to the trainees’ experiences of transfer and a social skill training program and will go beyond the method of surveys to gather a more robust data set through in-depth interviews with trainees and trainers. Guiding this work, the study will examine two questions:

RQ1: How do training participant narratives describe the experience of training transfer?

RQ2: In what ways are participant experiences of transfer compatible or incompatible with the major themes of the training program?

The following chapter will discuss methods used to investigate and explore these questions.
METHODS

Narrative Approach

Most studies on training transfer have employed survey methods that rely on self-report yes/no responses from those who have participated in training programs (Salas-Cannon Bowers, 2001). Despite the immense practical need, there is little research that specifically captures the rich experiences of training transfer as described by the training participants (Gilpin-Jackson & Bushe, 2007). A more complete examination of the experiences of training participants would most certainly enhance the overall understanding of practice (Edwards, 1998); knowing more about the experiences trainees have with skill transfer will provide a unique and important guide to managers, human resource professionals, and trainers.

Narratives “provide rich data that express movement, interpret ideas, and describe from the storyteller’s perspective how things used to be and how they are, as well as how they should be” (Feldman, Sköldberg, Brown, & Horner, 2004, p. 150). Narratives are a universal form of communication, a method of sharing how we make meaning of events that is natural as we reflect on our own understandings of experiences in different environments. In organizational and communication research there is a clear advantage to the collection of narratives:

when people talk about their work, they rarely talk about the mechanical aspects of their jobs. Stories... provide us with a broader picture of what they do talk about, and in turn what parts of the work give rise to its feeling. Overall, these narratives paint a picture of work experience, behavior, and emotions that is different from what we are
often presented with. We see from these stories that feeling at work is not a straightforward evaluative reaction to the job, but a finely textured, constantly changing product of the doing of work. The doing of work, in turn, is not as much involved with the performance of tasks as it is with interacting, transacting, and synchronizing with others. (Boudens, 2005, p. 1303)

For this reason, narratives play an important and untapped role in training research and how innovations such as training programs are diffused. This qualitative study will collect the narratives of training participants and trainers through in-depth interviews both pre- and post-training. The choice to focus on the narrative aspect of data collection for this study was purposeful; data that is shared in the form of organizational members’ stories moves beyond self-report training evaluation and survey responses and taps in to the deeper perceptions of training transfer experienced by training participants. In the process of telling their stories, it was anticipated that training participants would have more candor, and, as such, this data would add significant value to the gap that exists in current training transfer research. Given the research questions for this study, the narrative approach is the best way to capture and more fully conceptualize the experiential transfer of skills.

For the purposes of this study, a narrative was defined broadly using Czarniawska’s (1998) definition:

a narrative in its most basic form requires at least three elements: an original state of affairs, an action or an event, and the consequent state of affairs…They also must require plot, that is, some way to bring them into a meaningful whole. (p. 2)
To capture these narratives from training participants, an intensive series of interviews was collected and transcribed.

**Research Site and Sample**

In 2013, mediation was institutionalized as the first step in the North Carolina Office of State Human Resources (OSHR) grievance policy. As a result, OSHR offers mediation training several times a year to build a cadre of state employees who are trained mediators for the state. A private, not-for-profit dispute resolution firm conducts the week-long employment mediation training in close collaboration with OSHR. This site was selected for this study because the Communication Department at North Carolina State University had a preexisting relationship with both OSHR and the dispute resolution firm. The relationship enabled this researcher to have access to resources, training materials, and contextual information that would have been hard to replicate with an unknown organization.

The timing of the mediation training also provided an opportunity to conduct in-depth research before, during, and after the training in order to gain insights into the trainees’ experiences with training transfer over time. Access to participants for interviews over an extended period of time was one of the primary reasons for selecting this mediation training rather than a more general conflict skills training program.

A total of 28 participants attending the mediation training were nominated by their supervisors based on their supervisory roles (managing teams of personnel in their individual departments) and as recognition for their leadership abilities. Training participants were enthusiastic about and supportive of the opportunity to become mediators for the state. The mediation director for OSHR informed all training participants of the study and asked them
to contact the researcher if they were interested in participating. Of the 28 participants attending the training, 16 participants (5 male, 11 female) volunteered to participate in the study and communicated directly with the researcher via email, phone, and in person. Participants in the study had been employed by the State of North Carolina in various roles ranging from just over five years to more than 20 years. All training participants held a managerial or supervisory role in which they oversaw other employees in some capacity. In order to protect the confidentiality of participants, their names were not recorded in the study notes, interviews, or transcriptions.

**Data Collection**

Prior to the mediation training, the Director of OSHR introduced the researcher and the proposed project to all participants via email. The Director also introduced the researcher to everyone on the first day of the training program. Those participants who volunteered to participate in the study and be interviewed signed consent forms via hard copy or Google documents. Data collection for the study consisted of a compilation of all training materials, pre- and post-training interviews with training participants, observation of the complete 40-hour mediation training program, and two post-training interviews with trainers.

Pre-training interviews were conducted with all 16 training participants who volunteered for the study; the majority of these interviews were completed prior to the mediation training program. Those who were not available prior to the training were interviewed during the first day of the mediation training program. Interviews were conducted via phone or in person in a conference room located in the training center. All
interviews were recorded with the participants’ consent and were then transcribed by the researcher.

The goal of participant interviews was to learn about their pre-training mediation skills and their post-training experiences with the transfer of mediation skills. The pre-training interviews included four open-ended questions that were designed to encourage interviewees to describe in great detail their pre-training experiences with mediation and their expectations for the upcoming training program. Pre-training interview questions included:

1) Please tell me about some of the mediation skills you have used in your past mediations or conflict situations? Where have you mediated either formally or informally?; 2) What might be helpful for you in a mediation and/or conflict training?; 3) How would you describe previous experiences where you have mediated or been in conflict?; and 4) What specific skills would you like to learn in a mediation and/or conflict training? Following the completion of the first 16 interviews, observation of the 40-hour, week-long mediation training program was completed. Through this observation, the researcher obtained valuable context for the training agenda and material. Taking copious notes on trainer scripts and discussions held during each training session, the researcher witnessed how the trainers taught different elements of the training program. Notes from the training recorded items such as: Where was emphasis placed? What terms and skills were highlighted most prominently? In addition, notes included observations of what sessions and skills the participants wanted to spend the most time discussing and practicing. Without observing the training, this information would have been overlooked or missed entirely.
During this intensive period of observation, the researcher also paid close attention to the training participants, watching carefully to see their reactions to different information sessions, taking notes on the questions that were asked, noting which elements of the training may or may not have raised more concerns with participants, and identifying where in the training participants requested more assistance, guidance, or examples from the trainers. Observing and subsequently transcribing all notes and recordings from the week-long training provided a significant context for the subsequent descriptions of transfer experiences shared by training participants.

Approximately three months after the completion of the mediation training program, a second round of post-training interviews was conducted with 12 of the initial 16 participants.\(^1\)

The second interviews were conducted via phone, recorded with permission of the participant, and transcribed. The second phase of interviews sought to gather narratives of how training participants had experienced the transfer of skills from the mediation training back to their work environments. These interviews included four open-ended questions that encouraged participants to share their experiences with skills learned since the completion of the training. In addition, these questions encouraged participants to analyze these experiences and discuss why a particular skill may or may not have been implemented. Questions from the second round of interviews (post-training) included: 1) What was most useful from the training session in October? Why might this particular aspect from the training have been

\(^1\) Due to attrition, only 12 of the original 16 participants were available for the post-training interviews.
most useful for you and your experiences since the training?; 2) Tell me about a specific example of mediation or conflict that may have occurred in your workplace since the training; how did you handle this situation?; 3) How were the training exercises relevant or not to your workplace experiences since the training?; and 4) How does this type of training assist in your daily activities at work? How does it help? The interview transcriptions and observation notes from the week-long training totaled nearly 150 pages.

Finally, the researcher interviewed two of the trainers three months after the completion of the mediation training program. Through these interviews, the researcher sought to gather detailed descriptions of how the trainers talk about the training program and their own experiences regarding how training participants may or may not transfer skills. All training materials, including the training manual, training handouts, forms, activities, and trainer scripts and notes totaled 200 pages.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data follows the process of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis “provides an appropriate method for systematically uncovering thematic aspects in accounts of lived experience” (Ryan & Bernhard, 2003) that will provide insight into the most common ways that participants describe their experiences. The analysis was completed in three phases. First, the researcher read through the entire participant interview data set. Second, using a process of open coding, the researcher read through all interview transcripts again; this repeated reading of the data enabled the researcher to identify recurring similarities in the language of the participant narratives. These similarities, if found in eight
(50%) or more of the participants’ narratives, were then defined conceptually as a major or dominant theme in the data.

To verify the major themes found by the researcher, a second rater was asked to review the data; this individual was blind to the research questions for the study. The second rater read through the data in the same sequence of steps as the primary researcher and was asked to record the main themes he/she found to be present in the data. These findings were then compared to the researcher’s findings; the researcher and the second rater discussed the findings in order to provide context for the themes that each had found and to corroborate (or refute) that their individual descriptions had the same focus. For example, the researcher described a common theme of “neutral position,” which she found common across participant interviews. The second rater noted this same theme but described it as “a desire to not take sides or get involved.” Discussion aided in the confirmation of any overlap or discrepancies of these descriptions.

**RQ1.** In order to answer the first research question (How do training participant narratives describe the experience of training transfer?), the major themes from the participant narratives were gathered in the process of analysis described above. An example of a narrative from the data which meets the three elements of narrative defined by Czarniawska (1998) is:

I had an employee who was out of work, who was very upset and in a depressed manner and came to talk with me about his personal financial situation. You know, that type of thing. And I listened to everything he had to say, and I of course offered him the employee assistance program. And I encouraged him and tried to be positive
with him and tried to help him without crossing the line and saying, ok I am a psychologist because I’m not. I tried to offer him every type of potential help I could and listen to him. He needed someone to hear him and listen to him. (Participant #6)

Additionally, two examples of language in participant narratives that was coded as the same theme (Neutral Position) were:

Just being able to hear out both sides and being able to keep a neutral opinion throughout the conflict and then try to make some kind of resolution that’s fair to both parties (Participant #1)

I talked about trying to see if there is a middle road where we can meet where it is a win-win situation for everybody. It’s that we are going to work together… (Participant #5)

The first research question was not framed in terms of the diffusion of innovations in order to reduce researcher bias. But because this study is theoretically informed by Rogers’ (1983) theory, it was important to examine whether this framework was helpful in the analysis of the participant’s descriptions of their experiences. As such, the researcher reviewed the major themes from the participant narratives for any similarities to Rogers’ (1983) characteristics of an innovation as defined in chapter two. The researcher compared where each dominant theme may have portrayed examples of relative advantage, trialability, compatibility, complexity, and observability. If at least five examples within any one theme described issues that were similar to an innovation characteristic, then the researcher noted a similarity between the theme and the characteristic.
Table 1 provides an example of the movement of data analysis from the participant narrative to the themes coded within the narrative and to a similarity with characteristics of diffusion of innovation theory.
Table 1

**Sample Analysis: Moving from Narratives to Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative (excerpt)</th>
<th>Theme (excerpt)</th>
<th>DOI Connection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Original state of affairs</strong></td>
<td>Recently, the whole program, they have a new supervisor and all of the employees were not happy with her management or her leadership style.</td>
<td>Compatibility: how a deeper level of listening will help achieve a more complete understanding of the issues experienced by employees and the supervisor and as a result meet the needs of those managing the organizational conflict.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>An action or an event</strong></td>
<td>I just really tried to go in to it with an open mind. Listening and trying to hear everyone out. Then we met with the supervisor and listened to her.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The consequent state of affairs</strong></td>
<td>As the weeks have gone on, we’ve really learned more about what some of the real problems are. It’s not necessarily just what the employees think they are but the challenges the new manager is facing. The biggest thing for learning in the mediation training is that things aren’t always what they seem despite what folks are saying; how to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>hear and get to the real issue is probably the hardest and most important part.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

RQ2. To answer the second research question (In what ways are participant experiences of transfer compatible or incompatible with training themes?), the same thematic analysis and open coding used for the participant interviews was completed for all of the training materials. Training materials consisted of:

- All written communication from trainers to trainees prior to the training session
- All written Mediation Training information (created by Carolina Dispute Settlement Services (CDSS)) including the complete mediation training handbook, training agenda, trainer presentations, and session handouts
- All observation notes from the 40 hour/week-long training program
- Interviews with two trainers

The researcher read through all of the training materials twice, taking notes of emergent themes within the language of the trainers’ scripts, presentations, experiences, and materials from the training. If a theme was found at least five times in both the language of the major training materials (handbook, agenda, session handouts) and the trainer’s presentations and discussions, then it was noted as a dominant theme.

In addition to confirmation of these themes via the second rater, steps were also taken to verify the emergent themes from the training materials with the trainers. The themes were shared with the trainers to determine whether they were consistent with their perceptions of the training materials.

Upon verification of the training themes, the researcher then examined the data to determine whether there was compatibility between the major themes found in participant narratives about training transfer and the themes which emerged from the training.
Specifically the researcher looked at the ways in which the themes of the participant’s experiences of transfer were compatible or incompatible with the dominant themes of the training program. For example, did the participant themes discuss a desire for skills that were a part of a major theme in the training materials?

Results of the thematic analysis are discussed in detail in the following chapter.
RESULTS

Examination of the training participant interviews revealed three dominant themes in how the participants described their experiences of transfer. Additionally, the analysis of observations and the training materials revealed five major themes which were then compared to those themes that emerged from the participant responses. These results are reported below as they relate to the individual research questions.

RQ 1 – Participant Themes of Transfer

The first research question asked how training participant narratives describe the experience of skill transfer. The detailed analysis of both the pre and post-training interviews revealed three dominant themes that emerged in participant descriptions of these experiences; the themes include motivation for transfer, need for communication skills, and training-to-practice gap. Only one theme, need for communication skills, had subthemes. The subthemes include expertise, neutral position, comfort level, and active listening. The emergent themes and subthemes are the aspects of the participant experiences that help us understand what is happening during training transfer.

Motivation for transfer. The first of the three major themes that emerged in response to RQ1 was the motivation for transfer. Eleven of the 16 participants in the study described being motivated for the opportunity to attend the training. Frequent descriptions of motivating factors (both professional and personal) in the participant experiences detail how the participants believed the skills they learned from the training would have a direct impact on their daily work routines as well as personal experiences:
Deepening my skill, understanding the model, being able to provide it, you use those mediation skills in your workplace. It’s not called a formal mediation but um, clearly the conflicts that I am most clearly working with, what have been presented to me in my workplace are supervisor and employee conflicts. (Participant 7, Pre-training)

Having myself, personally divorced, I mean I stayed in a bad marriage for a long period of time, but at some point in time I got a clue that, you know, the best answer was to find a way out. And because this was not going to resolve. And I understand the desire to resolve, especially if you’ve taken a vow as I did then. But this is a workplace, there is no vow before God. (Participant #11, Pre-training)

I had a mediation experience that was horrible. It completely impacted my life. I was getting divorced and it was at the most vulnerable point in my life that I walked in there and she was horrible, she was so not neutral. And we were discussing really important things, stuff about our kid, and the words that she was using were horrible and she was totally siding with him. And I remember thinking, I am a person who advocates for myself pretty well, but other women walk in here and they are a piece of pulp at this point (Participant 13, Pre-training).

An important consideration in relation to the motivation for transfer theme is the process in which participants were selected for the mediation program. Training participants were chosen by their supervisors as individuals with leadership potential who had earned the opportunity for professional development. In addition, they were individuals who had expressed an interest in learning mediation and serving as a future mediator for the state. With this background, the participants came to the training motivated to learn and
subsequently transfer the skills following the completion of the training. It is, therefore, not surprising that their descriptions of the transfer experience would include frequent discussions of motivation and motivating factors.

The motivation for transfer theme also emerged in participants’ descriptions of use of mediation skills across multiple contexts. Participants described situations they wanted to be better prepared for at home, church, and in other community groups.

I get a lot of these opportunities with my daughters and their friends. They come to me as their mediator, they want me to help them with their relationships, boyfriend, girlfriend, um so I get a lot of opportunities with young people to utilize those skills. (Participant #4, Pre-training)

And you know, being married, you use conflict resolution at home. My husband is really, really strong headed, and therefore you do, I think trying to see the other person’s point of view is really important for conflict resolution. Just trying to take them out of it. How did that make you feel? (Participant #11, Pre-training)

I am part of a writing group and one of our members had kind of gone off the rails and his feedback he was giving people during sessions was much too harsh and he was alienating everyone. So we had to sit him down and find out well, what is going on and, do you realize that you have kind of ostracized yourself. And I had to basically, in this thing which is in my personal life, put on a mediator and HR professional type hat. And it did not go well. He walked. But we knew going in to it that that was going to be a distinct possibility when we called him on his behavior. But it made me realize that, everyone always says, oh you’re such a good HR type
person, but I know, I knew I didn’t, there were things that I could have done better. I could have preserved that relationship and I didn’t because I just didn’t have the skills to manage it when there was anger going on there. (Participant #16, Pre-training) Examples from participant narratives (shown above) highlight situations in which participants were able to see tangible, visible evidence of the skill, whether they were observed in discussions with their spouses or children or within small groups. Skills used in mediation value fairness, open-mindedness, and patience, which participants believed were consistent with how they wanted to act across many situations and social contexts. This level of compatibility between the mediation training and the many ways they could use the skills was certainly a motivating factor for training transfer.

**Need for communication skills.** In pre-training interviews, a common theme that emerged in the descriptions of transfer experiences was the desire to become more professional in their mastery of particular skills. Fifteen of the 16 participants perceived a skill deficit including, but not limited to, an ability to know what to say and when to say it, to remain unbiased, to be comfortable with conflict and mediation, and to listen. Participants hoped that, following the training program, using the skills would become effortless in the reality of their workplace environments. Although described in different ways, the need for these various communication skills was an integral part of the stories participants shared in describing their expectations for and experiences with training transfer. Four subthemes that emerged within the need for communication skills theme were expertise, neutral position, comfort level, and active listening.
**Expertise.** Participants wanted expertise; specifically, they wanted the actual, in-the-moment skills that are needed to maneuver through a mediation or conflict environment including explicit language and processes. Participants stated, “tell us what to say.” But this type of knowledge was also described as more intangible as well; knowing how to *read* the participants, the *right* way to say things, and stay in control of reactions to what is going on.

Expertise was often described by participants as knowing the language:

What is most useful is the language; the language the trainers will use as far as how to stay out of a judgmental or provocative role, ah, how to invite more conversation, more giving of information, um without sounding attacking or critical…maybe I shouldn’t have used that word…(Participant #9, Pre-training)

The biggest thing is the skill of how to rephrase a negative to a positive. I think that’s the mediation skill that you use everywhere, in conversation, in writing, in performance ratings. You know, to be able to tell someone, um your issues, like on a performance rating and to be able to turn it around and say these are your opportunities. (Participant #16, Post-training)

It was really helpful for me to hear about the various possibilities and variations that might come across my desk. And it was helpful, you know, going through even like the introductions as a mediator, that’s helpful because I really feel like I’ve got it memorized. (Participant #2, Post-training)

These discussions highlighted the desire of participants to have been given instruction on what to say, in essence, a script. The opportunity to practice specific words and phrases that have been recommended by mediation training experts reduces uncertainty and provides a
sense of comfort in contrast with previous situations in which the participants struggled to know what to say.

The participants’ descriptions also revealed less tangible skills that were crucial to their perception of needing greater expertise. These types of skills included being able to read the participants, better awareness of their own verbal and nonverbal communication, and a certain level of ability to manage the emotions happening during mediation. Participants described their desire to be able to use these skills without second-guessing themselves or having adverse physical reactions (in body or spoken language) during a conflict or mediation session.

I want to be more effective and clear in my communication. Just to make sure you know, that I am conveying exactly what needs to be said when it needs to be said. Just you know, trying to, I guess read, you know, the employee or the grievant or the respondent. (Participant #10, Pre-training)

I need to become more aware of my own words and um, body language and how that translates and affects other people who I am trying to be neutral towards. (Participant #4, Pre-training)

You don’t have time to walk away in the reality. If I have time to write something, and plot it out and think about it, I think I do very well but in the moment is where I really need to work on my responses. (Participant #16, Pre-training)

The thing that prepared me the most I would say is how to handle those moments where, I don’t know, this might sound like a bad phrase to you, but how to handle those outrageous moments. The moments where someone’s reaction is just not
workplace appropriate. The anger, um, the sadness, the grief. How to handle something that just doesn’t happen on a daily basis. And to be able to experience that moment as a mediator but also do my job. (Participant #6, Post-training)

Participant descriptions revealed that these complex issues (of expertise and mastery of a communication skill) are critical in how they think about their own experiences of transfer; they were thinking seriously about how they would manage the adoption of such skills and the desire to be successful in that adoption.

Neutral position. A second subtheme within the need for communication skills theme was neutral position. Participant narratives revealed their anticipated difficulty with presenting themselves as neutral and remaining neutral in the midst of a heated and potentially political mediation where they may have biases regarding the overall situation or the rights of an individual. Participants describe their transfer of these types of skills as complex. Participant discussions of this subtheme moved beyond the simple report of this is what I want to learn and this is what occurred. Many participants spoke to the difficulties they experienced in how transfer transpires in the actual moment. A skill may be practiced in the training environment but the complexity of that skill is more pronounced when it is experienced in a real mediation. Participants’ descriptions revealed their struggles with the attempt to be neutral – how do we actually do this with our words, our actions, our questions, and our body language?

Trying to present a neutral front…just the way my mannerisms, and my facial expressions, and even the way I phrased a sentence was probably not the best way to
I don’t think I really know how to ask open-ended questions. I think that walking into this, I think that I come to conclusions before I even hear someone’s story and I formulate you know, my response and so I want to learn a skill as to be open to information and how to invite that information out of them. (Participant #15, Pre-training)

So I am going to gather the evidence to put in my report. So again, that might involve a fine in the end or that might involve holding someone accountable in some way and so I have kind of really honed in on those skills and in a way I am not comfortable with that because I lose this other side. And I think that’s part of the reason is that what I want to get out of this training is really trying to remember the neutral at times, trying to see the other individual’s side. (Participant #13, Pre-training)

That’s the problem I’ve been having, because I know the policies and SOP’s and things of that nature, I just need to revamp and realize that I have to be more of a neutral party. And I want to reflect that coming across to individuals. Because I don’t want anyone to think that I’m, pro this side or pro this side, I want to be neutral. (Participant #14, Pre-training)

This subtheme highlights the transfer experience as an endeavor to be professional, stay neutral, or stay open-minded. In this way, the neutral position theme was focused on the transfer of skills that would enhance an individuals’ performance of his or her job.
Descriptions in this subtheme did not speak to the emotions that may be involved in the experience of transfer of mediation skills.

**Comfort level.** A third subtheme of the *need for communication skills* theme was *comfort level*. Participants noted the need, on a more personal level to be comfortable in a mediation and/or conflict. They indicated that, through training and practice, participants would gain the ability to stay emotionally unattached in situations of heated disagreement, anger, and moments of awkward displays of emotions. This skill was described in more personal terms as participants perceived their ability to master their comfort level as an individual responsibility.

I mean, I don’t mean to sound like I don’t want the detail or whatever, but I have a tendency to turn red when things get um, uncomfortable. You know. So it’s easier for me to talk to you on the phone than it is to do it face to face sometimes. So I am looking to be able to, um to do it in a professional manner so that it’s not you know, a distraction for one. (Participant #4, Pre-training)

I want to be comfortable, I want to feel like a…knowledgeable enough that I can walk in to a mediation and handle it from beginning to end. (Participant #7, Pre-training)

So to go in to one of these sessions where you are actually looked at as an agent of change in a good way, they really kind of prepped me for that. So when you have that perspective, it is ok to have those moments where you make a mistake and that you feel like you aren’t following a script. Or when things go off script, that you can kind of adapt to any given situation and being able to deal with those rough moments of honest emotion. They gave me a perspective that you are going to go in and have the
ability to really affect change in someone’s life if you do your job right (Participant #6, Post-training)

The transfer experience was aligned with the perception of comfort. Feeling confident and at ease with the sometimes difficult emotions that arise in mediation was described by participants as an important development in their experiences using the skills from training. Like the neutral position subtheme, participants described a higher level of comfort in terms of the advantages the successful transfer of this skill would provide them across multiple areas of their lives. Participants perceived increased comfort with conflict as having a higher level of confidence with their own communication skills.

Active listening. A final subtheme within the need for communication skills theme was active listening. Participants raised the issue of listening and their differing abilities to do so in their descriptions of the transfer experience. The ability to listen actively and intentionally to both sides involved in a mediation was a skill that training participants desired and were acutely aware of as they experienced potential transfer of these skills. Participants spoke to the numerous aspects of their experiences in the transfer of the skill of listening:

…he needed someone to hear him and listen to him. I really feel like your listening skills are most important in any conflict because then you hear… (Participant #6, Post-training)

I do think that I am a good listener but at the same time sometimes, I don’t know that I really hear every element. And when I say that, I don’t mean, I think sometimes
maybe I don’t do such a great job of bringing it back to them and saying is this truly what you are feeling, is this really where you are? (Participant #12, Pre-training)

Well, I would have to say the active listening part. It has enhanced my reaction to people in general, just paying more attention to what people say and being an active listener. It has really improved how I relate to people and how I listen to people.

(Participant #9, Post-training)

Listening as a communication skill was perceived to be crucial in how mediators focus on interests and reframe an individual’s concerns.

The participant interviews confirm that the deficit they feel with these types of communication skills is due in part to the complex nature of the skills and the environments in which they are put to use (mediations and conflicts). But participant descriptions of their experiences with transfer also revealed a focused and determined view of social skills. Rather than being overwhelmed by the long-term maintenance and continuous practice needed to master the need for communication skills, participants were motivated by the challenge and by what they believed would be the rewards of these efforts.

**Training to practice gap.** The third major theme that emerged in response to the first research question was *training to practice gap* - the perceived gap that is often present between the training and the reality of practice. Nine of the 16 participants described the transfer experience based on whether there were differences between the training environment and the reality of the practice environment, what steps they may take to overcome differences between the two environments, and how the training may or may not
have attempted to bridge the gap between learning the skill in training and using that skill beyond the training environment.

The *training-to-practice-gap* theme revealed the participants’ desire to replicate in the training what they will experience back in their workplaces. The role-play sessions were frequently described as very valuable in helping to bridge this gap:

You are actually simulating the experience you are going to have in the mediation, you get to practice very immediately what it is that it’s going to be like. It increases your skill set but most importantly it increases your confidence. (Participant #7, Post-training)

Well the role playing for sure was relevant. And um, you probably saw some of the role playing, right? Well, people were uh, they were putting a bit of a spin on it as far as uh, maybe overacting, but it wasn’t too far from real life in my experience And uh, that was very relevant. (Participant #2, Post-training)

The role play when we were relating it to real situations that were there. And employment situations that we understand as being state employees. That part was really good for me. I felt, me personally, just felt like I needed a lot more of that then some of the others sitting there talking about kind of thing. I think I am a person who learns better from doing not necessarily just listening. (Participant #8, Post-training)

Participant descriptions reported the importance of the opportunity to test, practice, and use the skills that were being discussed in the training; these opportunities enhanced their experiences of transfer.
I intend to go back through my books and notes to get refreshed back on what I was being taught and so forth. And coming up with those key words of finding feelings to match up to what the person may be relating. I think that is a skill that has to develop as you practice more. I think if you are utilizing them enough in the meditation training, once you get going, that the skills get better and better. But until you’re put in to a position to utilize them, I won’t say they are going to waste now because I still remember it, but I think I’m going to have to refresh a little bit once this thing gets up and rolling. (Participant #1, Post-training)

There are only so many standardized sort of problems when it comes to grievances that can happen, as they shared with us, so obviously there are all of these variations but I think hearing and um, going through a lot of those kind of helped me feel more prepared for what could come across my desk, um, every day, and then also you know, be prepared for what would likely come across as state mediators too. It was helpful going through, even like introductions as a mediator, when you go through kind of like the rules and policies of the mediation, that’s just like from a hard skills, that’s helpful because I really feel like I’ve got it memorized now because we did it so much (Participant #5, Post-training)

Similar in ways to the concept of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the training-to-practice-gap theme also illustrated the participants’ desire to seek advice and counsel from veteran practitioners regarding the new skills they were learning in training. Participant narratives described acknowledgment of a wealth of experience from
their co-participants, and there was a desire for more specific examples from these individuals since all the training participants were members of state government agencies.

With so many individuals who are currently in mediation roles [informal and formal HR, personnel] we need their experience to get to the nitty gritty of the compatibility and complexity of the training innovation. Will this actually work in our work environment, is this too theory laden – how will it look in practice? (Participant #10, Post-training)

I think you were able to learn better techniques from observing other people [participants] being the mediators. And when you got to go back and be a mediator the second time that you picked up on some of their traits because they were good. (Participant #1, Post-training)

Participants were interested in even more opportunities to draw upon stories and direct examples from fellow training participants (when those participants are in similar fields or work for the same organization). There is potential for creating greater connections between the training and the reality of the workplace environments when members of the training work through situational examples that are directly from their own experiences. The legitimacy of these examples is critical to bridging the gap between the training environment and the workplace environments.

In summary, three dominant themes emerged in the participant descriptions of their experiences of transfer. These themes describe how participants think about transfer and what happens in the transfer of skills from a mediation training; in transfer there are various motivations for using skills from training that reach beyond individual job responsibilities,
there is a need for communication skills that are effective beyond the completion of the training session, and there is a gap between training and the reality of work environments that serves as a constant reminder that transfer is a difficult process.

**RQ2 - Training Themes and Compatibility**

The second research question specifically examined the compatibility between the training and participant themes. Results of the comparison reported compatibility between four of the five training themes and one participant theme and two participant subthemes. The fifth training theme was an exception and highlighted an incompatibility between what the training provided and what the participants perceived as a needed skill. Prior to the discussion of these comparisons, the major themes of the training materials will be presented.

**Training themes.** A thematic analysis of the training materials found five major themes, or key concepts, that the trainers believe are important to being a good mediator. The major themes included listen to both parties, address emotions, acquire communication skills, practice skills, and attend to work environment. Of the five training themes two had subthemes; the *acquire communication skills* theme included subthemes of *listening, reframing, and identifying interests*. The *practice skills* theme included subthemes of *legitimate practice and safe environment*.

**Listen to both parties.** The theme of *listen to both parties* emerged across the training materials. Mediators serve as a third party to assist in the development of possible resolutions between two parties in conflict. A critical piece of this role is their impartial position in the process. So it is not surprising that one of the major themes of the training materials was the importance of listening to both parties in order to serve as a voice for both parties. As one
trainer described, “you’re not really neutral, you’re ‘omnipartial’. You want to be their best friend, gain trust” (Trainer #1). Although this may not seem surprising, it is important to note the consistency with which this theme was shared throughout the training. Not only did the training manual language stress the importance of neutrality, but trainer presentations, trainer responses to participant questions, coaching reflections following role plays, and personal examples shared by trainers consistently referred to the ability and importance of listening to both parties sitting at the table:

I like to not know what the case is about other than whether it’s about a termination or an evaluation. Um, because I like to be able to say, I am totally neutral, I don’t know anything about this case. (Trainer #1)

Think of interests that are common to both parties. The employer needs support from the employee, but guess what, the employee needs support from [the employer], too. So what we are doing when we work with needs and interests is that we [as the mediators] are trying to get them to understand each other, to empathize. Not even to understand but to empathize. (Trainer #2)

I just want you to keep in mind that your semblance of neutrality, your behavior in being a neutral, begins the minute you have contact with those folks. So the question is, when does your mediation begin? It begins the minute you have contact with one of the parties. (Trainer #1)

Think about someone like me who comes in to mediate these cases. I am expecting the parties to educate me if that is something I need to be educated on. I am neutral. I am competent enough because I know the mediation process. (Trainer #1)
One trainer talked about indicators she has come to recognize in her mediations that signal to her that she has become biased in the mediation; if she stops using the person’s name, she knows she is being biased. If she cuts someone off, it is a red flag (Trainer #3). Training materials and trainers stress the importance of neutrality and the role a mediator fulfills by listening to both parties involved in the mediation.

**Address emotions.** A second theme of the training materials was *address emotions.* Sometimes in discussions about conflict, the truth about the raw emotions, which may or may not be involved, is overlooked or touched upon at only a superficial level. Intense emotions in many cases are difficult to discuss and, from a training perspective, are very difficult to teach due to the unpredictable nature of the directions they may take. Therefore, it is notable that one of the most pronounced narratives from the training was the emphasis that emotions, no matter how intense, are not bad. The training manual did not focus on dealing with emotions directly other than a statement of policy regarding issues of workplace violence, and statements of the existence of these emotions: “…parties may be compelled to deal with sensitive, deeply personal issues. In those instances, mediation may awaken deep and painful feelings” (Training manual, p. 44). But, the consistent theme that was found in the presentations for each of the sessions of the program and in the question and answer sessions following role-play activities was that the inevitable emotions that may arise in these situations should not only be addressed but should be embraced in relation to the mediation process.

Encourage the sharing of feelings and perceptions as well as facts. So you know, people are going to be upset, or at least the grievant is usually upset…so it’s
important that they feel like they said everything they need to say and you heard and understood them and then you give the same courtesy to the respondent (Trainer #1)

So you need to be able to be direct, comfortable with high emotions, arguments, interruptions, and tears. I don’t know that you will get someone who is that distraught but you might. (Trainer #2)

Role-play scenarios raised difficult situations dealing with issues of religion, personal problems, and intense anger or frustration. Confronting the often powerful emotions associated with these types of mediations conveyed the difficulty of dealing with emotions but the importance of addressing them head on. For example, in one role-play, a participant playing the role of grievant was given the following prompt:

You are extremely upset over the loss of your job after all of the hard work that you have put into it. You don’t see why you can’t decorate your office in the way you want. It’s not like your religious items are out front in the lobby where everyone has to see them. And they’re not nearly as offensive as the calendars of women in bikinis that seem to litter the office and which you find highly offensive… (Role Play, Day 2)

Because participants played all of the different roles (grievant, mediator, respondent) over the course of role-play sessions throughout the training, they were presented with the opportunity to experience the emotion of these highly volatile situations from all sides. Additionally, the reflection discussions led by trainers after the role-plays directly addressed the emotional aspect of the experience. The presence of emotions and the effects these will have on mediation processes was established by trainers as a possible tool to consider in the ways you
move through a mediation; emotion was not simply glossed over as inevitable and impossible:

   Deal with the emotion, don’t jump to caucus [separating the parties to individual rooms] too soon. There will be emotion and you can work through it for as long as you need to before you have to break (if at all). Don’t be scared of the emotion!

   (Trainer #1)

   Training materials and presentations left no doubt over the course of the week-long training that emotion was an integral part of the mediation process. And it was best managed by understanding and accepting that it was not bad. Additionally, the recognition of the emotions involved with the mediation process was addressed by the importance placed on establishing trust with the parties involved in the mediation. Although a mediator serves as a neutral voice for both parties and does not become emotionally involved with the issues, the mediator cannot remain entirely emotionally detached. In the mediation process, the mediator must connect with the parties involved in order to establish trust. Training materials stress the importance of creating an atmosphere of respect, equity, and fairness…”the mediator is instrumental in creating a sense of safety and assurance” (Training Manual). Many of the training discussions and sessions detailing the different steps in the mediation process specifically note the importance of the establishment, maintenance, and building of trust between mediators and those involved in the mediation:

   You want to gain commitment…I can get people to sign an agreement in 30 minutes, but have we dealt with those issues? If we’re going to deal with those issues, it’s probably going to take a little more time. It takes a great deal of trust” (Trainer #1).
The emotional connections mediators create in this way are a crucial aspect of the overall potential for success of the mediation and, as such, it is not an aspect to be overlooked or avoided.

**Acquire communication skills.** A third theme found in the training materials was the crucial importance of how to acquire communication skills including the three subthemes of listening, reframing, and identifying interests. Throughout the materials there is heavy usage of these terms and discussions of what these terms mean; for example: “Reframing can change the game from battling positions to the challenge of meeting each other’s interests. Ask, ‘Why do you want that?’, ‘What would you do in their shoes?’, and ‘What if…?’ Let the problem be the teacher” (Training manual). The terms are even included in the descriptions of each stage of the mediation:

- Stage II… Reflect and summarize to be certain you understand; Begin reframing the problem in neutral terms…
- Stage III Summarize the main issues without judgment; Frame issues in terms of problems to be solved jointly… (Training manual)

The importance of the acquire communication skills theme was also reinforced by the time allotted in the training agenda/schedule for these types of skills. The majority of the morning on day two of the training was devoted to interactive sessions, allowing participants to practice reframing and summarizing skills with each other and with the group as a whole. In addition to these sessions, trainers spent copious amounts of time in presentations and in reflection discussions referring back to these communication skills:
Summarizing and reframing are some of the best skills a mediator can have! (Trainer #1)

I want you to start building a vocabulary of needs and interests (Trainer #1)

Yes. Listening. That’s probably the most important thing. It is listening and understanding what the parties are telling you. (Trainer #2)

The theme arose in the informal discussions and responses of the trainers during the training program as well:

Try to dress it up. You don’t have to say, if the supervisor says, we’re never giving that jerk his job back. You know, you learn about reframing (laughter). You don’t want to take back a message that blows your mediation up because it’s a voluntary process and nobody has to stay there. (Trainer #2)

Repetition of the importance of listening, reframing, and identifying interests throughout the training materials and presentations portrayed the significance placed on these communication skills in the mediation process.

**Practice skills.** The fourth of five themes in the mediation training materials was practice skills and included two subthemes of legitimate practice and safe environment. In the efforts made to provide opportunities for practice to training participants, the concern of legitimacy in training programs is an issue addressed through the concepts of legitimate peripheral participation and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991):

Learning is not reified as an extraneous goal or as a special category of activity or membership. ... practice is not merely a context for learning something else.

Engagement in practice—in its unfolding, multidimensional complexity—is both the
stage and the object, the road and the destination. What they learn is not a static subject matter but the very process of being engaged in, and participating in, developing an ongoing practice. (p. 95)

Training that understands and seeks to replicate the environments where participants will return and be expected to transfer skills attempts to provide opportunities where participants may practice skills in a legitimate environment. But the training can never be the real environment; therefore, any additional opportunities for practice is a critical part of the training program. The mediation training specifically included role plays for practice and discussion/coaching sessions around the opportunity for trainees to discuss with veteran mediators how the trained skills are used in reality – what they may come across when they are back in the reality of their work environments.

You are actually simulating the experience you are going to have in the mediation, you get to practice very immediately what it is that it’s going to be like. That it’s the most like what a mediation is going to actually be like. And you get to practice it right away. That gives you feedback, because you are observing, too, if you are smart, observing yourself and knowing what went well and what didn’t go well. And seeing on people’s faces what is going well and what didn’t go well. And then we had opportunity to get feedback from others and that’s just highly valuable. It increases your skill set but most importantly it increases your confidence. (Participant #7, Post-training)

As an example of legitimate practice – what participants will find in the actual mediations – great emphasis was placed on the preparation of introductions. Participants were asked to
draft the actual introductions they will use in their future mediation sessions and to read them to the group for critique and feedback:

So recognize your style and when you write your introduction, you want that style to begin to come out. That’s who you are. If you are, you know, firm and businesslike, then that’s ok. That’s the way you are going to be in the mediation. And you are going to work within those parameters. Whatever style works for you, you have to begin concentrating that as you are writing your introductions. (Trainer #1)

While the *legitimate practice* subtheme was an important consideration within the training, emphasis was also placed on skill practice in a safe environment. The *safe environment* subtheme was shown through the design and use of role-play coaches and reflection sessions. Participants were given instructions on how to serve as a coach during many of the role play sessions. These instructions suggested four techniques on how to intervene and detailed the role of the coach: “Observe the role play, noting what mediators do well and areas of improvement. Intervene only when necessary to keep the role play going and to enhance learning” (Training handouts). Participants were asked to critique each other as coaches, which helped to create an atmosphere of openness and acceptance. They were encouraged to seek out feedback from each other after each role play. Trainers themselves were open and honest and often discussed the hurdles they have faced in learning this process:

You will find yourself…if you don’t catch it in the mediation, you will go, I cannot believe I did that! I know I shouldn’t do that, I know what you said the rule was, but you know, it is easier to tell you what the rule is but when you are in the throes of it,
you know. You will make a mistake, and it’s ok. This is the best place for you to make a mistake. (Trainer #2)

The practice skills theme also arose frequently in trainer presentations as well as in the detailed information that was provided in the training manual, including detailed checklists and explanatory paragraphs where it suggested that training participants use a specific time during the training to practice the skills they are learning. Practice was not only acceptable but also encouraged. Questions from participants at any point during the agenda and during presentations were encouraged and welcomed by trainers. At no time did the trainers take away the opportunity for all participants to make sense of what they were learning. During three of the five days of training, sessions went far beyond their designated timelines on the original agenda due to numerous questions from participants and detailed discussions provided by the trainers. At no point did the trainers appear distressed over how these discussions altered the original agenda; their openness and willingness to assist participants in the development of the skills instead of focusing on what was next on the agenda reinforced the importance of practice.

**Attend to work environment.** A final major theme within the training materials was attend to work environment. Due to the fact that CDSS was the source of the training materials and program, and members of CDSS served as the trainers for the mediation program, quite obviously their experiences of mediation influenced the design of the program and the discussions during each session. Additionally, because OSHR assists in the assignment of mediators to different state agencies, departmental and state policies were foundational in the development of specific portions of the materials. In fact, the entire
morning of the third day of the training was allotted to OSHR administrators for detailed
discussions and instructions on state policies, processes, and procedures. The presence of
leaders from numerous state departments to discuss the importance of these mediations to the
state highlighted the significance of the training within the organizational culture. The
overarching theme of these policies is important in that it represents the organizational
environment where participants will be putting their mediation skills to use. Because the
trainers themselves had so much combined experience in these exact types of mediations for
the state and had worked so closely with OSHR, the design of the role-plays and other
sessions in the training were directly tied to the culture of the organization.

**Compatibility of Training and Participant Themes.** The second research question
asked: In what ways are participant experiences of transfer compatible or incompatible with
training themes? To answer this question the researcher sought to compare how training
participants described their expectations for the training and transfer experiences to the major
themes of the training program. Four of the five training themes were found to be compatible
with a participant theme and subthemes.

**Compatibility.** Compatibility was found between the training theme of *listen to both
parties* and *neutral position* (a subtheme of the participant theme *need for communication
skills*). The training emphasized the importance of listening and remaining neutral to both
parties in mediation which met the needs of the participants who desired to learn skills that
would enable them to present a neutral front as a way to achieve a higher level of
professionalism.
Compatibility was also found between the training theme *address emotions* and *comfort level* (a subtheme of the participant theme *need for communication skills*). The mediation training stressed the acceptance of intense emotions as an inevitable part of the mediation process while participant interviews revealed a desire to master the ability to be comfortable in the presence of intense emotions. Participant narratives described previous difficulties in staying calm when colleagues, for example, were angry or acted in an inappropriate way. The training was compatible with the needs of the participants.

The training subthemes *listening*, *reframing*, and *identifying interests* within the training theme *acquire communication skills* also highlighted an important compatibility. This particular compatibility was slightly different in that it was found between the training theme and the actual language used by the training participants in their narratives of training transfer experiences. The emphasis of these training subthemes within the training materials resulted in a strong perception of compatibility by participants and subsequent use of the specific terminology in participants’ descriptions of their experiences.

…to understand more what the person is going through and to reframe the question.

Whether it be an employee or not, to let them know that you understand what they’ve said, you get their confirmation by reframing. (Participant #8, Post-training)

Finally, compatibility was found between the training theme *practice skills* and the participant theme *training-to-practice-gap*. The mediation training was designed through careful consideration of the skills that would be needed for the workplace environments of the specific training audience; the issue of legitimacy was a priority that was apparent in the training design and training materials. This theme within the training was compatible with
participants’ desires to have the opportunity to practice the training skills in a realistic environment in order to help them feel more confident in the use of those skills once they returned to their workplace environments.

**Incompatibility.** In contrast, the comparison between training and participant themes highlighted one disconfirming case between the training theme of *attend to work environment* and the participant subtheme of *neutral position* (subtheme within the participant theme of *need for communication skills*). The training theme *attend to work environment* focused on skills that were specific to the mediation needs of the state (including the correctional division), yet participants who worked within this division perceived incompatibility between the mediation process of the work environment and the skills they desired to learn from the training, specifically a *neutral position*. Due to this incompatibility, participants believed it would be difficult to put on the mediation hat in these types of situations.

> It is hard for me to remind myself that I have no side. In my job, if someone had screwed up and crossed this line, they would be out of a job. There would be no discussion because it is a policy without exception. But as the mediator, I am now here to listen to what a grievant has to say about why they didn’t follow the policy.

(Participant #1, Post-training)

Analysis of results from the second research question emphasized connections among themes which are important in the continued development of a more robust understanding of the transfer experience. The significance of compatibility between the training and
participant themes as well as important implications of these findings will be discussed in detail in the final chapter.
There may be no observation about communication skills that is more fundamental, and more far-reaching in its implications, than that they are developed and refined over time through implementation. Communication skills do not appear instantaneously, fully developed, and ready to be applied in persuading, comforting, or understanding others. (Greene, 2003, p. 51)

A significant amount of research has been conducted over the years, across disciplines, that provides scholars and practitioners of training with information on what may be happening in the important process of skill transfer (Awoniyi, et al., 2002; Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Burke & Saks, 2009). Yet, the literature examining social skills training is not nearly as robust as studies of training for specific tasks. There is little concrete evidence that training transfers to job performance at all, especially "with training in conceptual, judgmental and cognitive skill areas, such as problem solving, management development, and interpersonal skills…where trainers admit they have no firm proof that the training impacts the way employees do their jobs" (Foxon, 1993, p. 134). This study set out to contribute to the understanding of training transfer by taking a communication perspective grounded in Rogers’ diffusion of innovations theory.

Rogers (1983) defines an innovation as “an idea, practice, or objective perceived as new by an individual, a group, or an organization” (p. 17). Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) theory describes characteristics of adopters (trainees), the innovation (training skills), and the environment (the workplace) that impact how rapidly and successfully an innovation will be adopted. By positioning the skills learned in training as new practices to be adopted in the workplace, we can see the transfer of trained skills as successful adoption of an innovation.
The DOI lens helps identify and describe aspects of the trainees, training design, and organizational environment that facilitates or impedes training transfer. To build a communication-based understanding, this study gathered narratives from training participants which detailed their expectations and experiences of transferring skills learned in a one-week mediation training back to the workplace.

**Participant Experiences of Transfer**

The emergent themes from the participant narratives were analyzed using DOI characteristics of an innovation. This guiding framework helped to ground the results of this study in concepts that have defined how innovations are adopted.

**Relative advantage.** Rogers explains that innovations are more likely to be adopted when users see the potential advantage over whatever exists at present. Previous training research found that participants with higher levels of pre-training motivation were found to transfer skills more successfully (Chiaburu & Marinova, 2005; Colquitt, et al., 2000; Foxon, 1993). If individuals believed that their successful completion of the training program would be rewarded by a supervisor or by a change in their job responsibilities (for example), the participants were more motivated and committed to transfer. Participant narratives of their transfer experiences confirm this aspect of pre-training motivation.

Part of the motivation described by the participants was driven by the potential connections they perceived between the trained skills and the different capacities in which they would use these skills. Those participants who discussed using mediation skills in multiple contexts reported that the training was perceived with greater value because it was
transferable across numerous contexts. When participants saw the advantage of an innovation (the learned skills) over their current activities in the workplace they were more motivated to adopt the new skills. The results showed the advantage of both mediation as a process and the skills that the mediation training provided.

In addition, many training participants believed that mediation, which requires the ability to be neutral, would promote better conflict resolution in their work environment. Understanding the advantages of maintaining neutrality appeared to increase participants’ desire for neutral position (participant subtheme within the need for communication skills theme).

**Trialability.** Rogers indicates that when people can adopt an innovation on a trial basis, or have a chance to practice it in a safe setting, they will adopt it more quickly. When participants described the opportunity to practice skills as a part of their experiences of transfer, this reflected Rogers’ characteristic of trialability. The experience of transfer was more productive when the participants believed they had had ample opportunity to try out the skills in training as well as in the first attempts of use within their workplace environments. When different communication skills could be tried at home or in the work environment the participants discussed a more thorough adoption of the skills.

As stated previously, Hutchins and Burke (2007) estimated that up to 85% of training resources were dedicated to designing and delivering training while the remaining 15% was left for both pre-training and post-training evaluation activities including any efforts at determining transfer of training. Trainers need to consider how the skills they are training will be accepted back in the workplace. More attention to training transfer highlights that the
skills emphasized in training programs may not match the reality of the work environments in which training participants are expected to use the new skills (Awoniyi, et al., 2002; Holton & Baldwin, 2003; Hutchins & Burke, 2007; Saks & Belcourt, 2006). Results confirmed that participants expressed concerns that training materials and examples would not mirror the experiences faced back in the organizational environment.

In education literature, the concept of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) describes the phenomenon of matching the training exercises to the actual workplace. This concept addresses the purposeful activities in training that expose the trainee to real life experiences from the field and practitioners who can speak to the exact conditions and experiences that a trainee will find in the field of practice. Training research supports that participants need to be able to use, practice, and process skills in experiences that are compatible with their individual work environments in order for enhanced skill transfer to occur;

…simple repetition or use of a skill even over an extended time period is not sufficient to bring about maximal performance. Rather what is required to achieve the highest levels of skill is highly structured activity in which people focus attention on the details of their behavior with an eye towards modifying and reorganizing their actions. (Greene, 2003, p. 77)

The participant theme training-to-practice gap not only reinforced the concept of legitimate peripheral participation but highlighted the need for trial opportunities. Participants recognized the need for training sessions and training examples (like role plays) to be closely related to their work experiences, the organizational values, and relevant situations. The fact
that the role play simulations were drawn directly from real state agency grievances made it clear in the training that these skills were needed and would be valued in the reality of the participants’ work environments. Nevertheless, the possible gap between training and practice is complex and may therefore hinder the adoption of the learned mediation skills.

When Edwards and Nicoll (2006) describe the complex and messy world of practice, the discussion reflects the typical difficulty associated with creating training programs that adequately assist participants with the use of the learned skills in the reality of their environments. In many social skills training programs, the trainers have expertise in the skill set and training processes rather than the specific work environment in which the skills will be used. This raises the potential for a gap between the training materials and the participants’ experiences. Although the current study results affirmed that participants were concerned about a potential gap between training and practice, this particular mediation training turned out to be an exemplary model of how this gap may be successfully narrowed through careful training development and design.

The mediation training presented by Carolina Dispute Settlement Services (CDSS) was designed and delivered by trainers who themselves are experienced mediators for the Office of State Human Resources (OSHR). After years of partnership between OSHR and CDSS, the trainers for this mediation training had a uniquely comprehensive understanding of the environment where training participants work. This first-hand knowledge of the state system, the types of conflicts brought to mediation, and the challenges unique to state agency employees had an enormous impact on the content of the training program and, specifically, the selected simulations that were developed for role-play sessions. In addition, OSHR’s
unique apprentice model for mediation training addressed concerns over the gap between training and practice. The apprentice model links participants from the mediation training to seasoned mediators for the state for their first mediations, until the trainee indicates he or she is comfortable to mediate on their own. Mediating together, as co-mediators, provides real-time experience that is invaluable to those who have recently attended the training. In this way, the apprentice model exemplified the importance of trialability (Rogers, 1983) and how participants learned through trial and error.

When issues of legitimacy are addressed in the development and processes of training programs it is the first step towards bridging the training-to-practice gap. This progress begins with strategic decisions in the design of the training program and will potentially have eventual impact on the participant experiences of transfer.

**Compatibility.** A strong compatibility emerged between the innovation (skills learned in the mediation training) and the values of both the participants and the larger organization. The participant subtheme of *active listening* (within the participant theme of *need for communication skills*) reflected this compatibility. Rogers’ (1983) describes that when the features of an innovation align with the participants’ existing values, past experiences, and current needs then it is more likely to be adopted. The frequency with which the participants referred to the ability to actively listen and the value they saw in mastering this skill portrayed the importance of compatibility within participants’ experiences of transfer.

The *motivation for transfer* theme was also consistent with Rogers’ (1983) concept of compatibility. Participants perceived value in the skills from the mediation training because
they were compatible with numerous areas of their lives – they were motivated for transfer because they perceived a similar set of values between the training and their personal and professional lives.

To focus training and discussions of transfer on only one of the contexts where the skills will be used is to miss an important connection that training participants clearly value. Rather than singling out how to design a training program to be compatible with either the organizational context and values or the participants’ personal context and values, discussions of compatibility and training designs would benefit from the consideration of how both value systems overlap and affect the overall experiences of transfer. Training which reinforces the broader applicability of the learned skills would address how participants are actually thinking about (and experiencing) the application of these skills.

Complexity. The difficulty of how to obtain and master the less tangible skills highlighted in the participant subthemes of comfort level and neutral position is supported by the characteristic of complexity (Rogers, 1983). Rogers describes how the more complex an innovation, the less likely, or more difficult, adoption will be. For example, skills that would assist participants in the development of comfort in emotionally intense situations or presenting a neutral front are complex; there was not one single task that could be completed in order to learn how to have a neutral position in a mediation. The transfer experience is laden with the previously held beliefs and habits of each individual, and these are often a difficult hurdle to overcome in the transfer process. Previous knowledge of organizational policies and rules in some situations created hesitation on the part of the participants in whether they were capable of maintaining a neutral position. The complexity of presenting a
neutral front and the uncertainty of mediation situations certainly parallels the difficulties of adoption raised by Rogers with this specific characteristic.

The final characteristic of an innovation is observability which is the “degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others” (Rogers, 1983, p. 266). Other members of the organization determine whether the skills are observed in use after the training and this study did not address these perceptions.

**Compatibility between Training and Participant Goals**

Extending the DOI model to the theory of training transfer suggests that greater compatibility between the innovation (training skills) and the values of the trainees and their work environment will facilitate training transfer. This study, therefore, examined the training narrative, defined as the key themes trainers wanted to convey to participants, with the themes which emerged from the participant interviews. The goal was to determine whether the training themes were compatible with the values of the participants and their expectations for the skills they hoped to learn from the training.

The five major themes of the training materials were *listen to both parties, address emotion, acquire communication skills, practice skills, and attend to work environment*. Compatibility was found between four of the five training themes and one participant theme (*training to practice gap*) and numerous subthemes within the participant theme of *need for communication skills*. One disconfirming case illustrated an inconsistency between a communication skill the participants desired and how the training attended to the workplace environment (fifth training theme). The results of these comparisons have important implications for theory and practice.
**Listen to both parties.** Compatibility found between the participant and training themes highlighted a possible connection between what participants have received in the training and how they processed this information to then put the skill to use. For example, the participant subtheme *neutral position* (within the participant theme *need for communication skills*) focused on the ability to be neutral. This coincides with the training theme *listen to both parties*. The ways in which participants talk about transferring skills that will allow them to remain neutral and impartial demonstrates how a core principle of the training, which emphasized the need to make sure both parties are heard, met the perceived needs of the training participants. The compatibility of the themes showed a form of agreement between the participants and the training - participants wanted to learn how to maintain neutrality and the training sought to teach participants skills in how to act neutral in mediation. The values of these skills in training matched the participants’ values of a desired skill (Rogers’ compatibility).

**Address emotion.** Similarly, compatibility between the training theme of *address emotion* and the participant subtheme of *comfort level* (a subtheme within the participant theme of *need for communication skills*) showed that the training met the need raised by participants to build skills that would increase their acceptance of emotion. Participants described a desire to master comfort with emotions; rather than avoiding the intense emotions that will inevitably be involved with the mediations they will participate in; they approached the challenge of this type of situation with a plan to become more comfortable with the emotions, what Hochschild (1983) describes as emotional labor, “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (p. 7). Their narratives
described fear and problems associated with dealing with intense emotions in the past but portrayed an increased level of commitment to accept these potentially volatile situations following the training. The willingness to be more accepting of emotions in order to successfully transfer skills mirrored the messages that were imbedded within the training materials and trainer presentations and may be an additional indication of organizational socialization (Scott & Meyers, 2005; Tracy, 2005). This compatibility showed an alignment between the perceived needs of the participants and the skills deemed important by the State and mediation trainers (the organization).

**Acquire communication skills.** An additional compatibility was found between the training theme *acquire communication skills* (including subthemes of *listening, reframing,* and *identifying interests*) and the language used by participants in post-training interviews. In pre-training interviews, participants described the skills they thought they needed for successful mediation. The narratives shared by participants in the post-training interviews then directly reflected the specific language of the major training theme *acquire communication skills* (and its subthemes).

In the post-training interviews, the majority of the training participants referred specifically to “active listening,” “reframing,” and “summarizing interests.” These are all specific terms that had been used frequently throughout the training program, in trainer presentations, and in many of the supplemental materials within the theme of *acquire communication skills*. To find them being used so often in the descriptions of how each of the participants were experiencing transfer after the training portrayed how the training had met the needs of the participants and had become a part of their skill set in the workplace.
experience. The participants had internalized the language from the training so deeply that it had become a normal part of their vernacular in describing how they mediated conflicts or worked through different processes. This specific terminology was seen three months later woven into the narratives the participants shared about their experiences of transfer of the mediation skills. The use of these terms was not prompted by the interview questions and was not in reference to what had been included in the training, but instead the participants used the terms as their way to describe what was taking place in the situations they had mediated. These results offered an important insight into the significance of the scripts and materials that are used in training design; trainers and their materials play a role in how participants work through transfer. The compatibility of participants’ language also served as a concrete example of what transfer looks like in progress and highlights what Kunda (1992) refers to as the dual nature of (organizational) culture, where the organization’s context, including expectations and rules for behavior, merges with the personal contexts of the participants’ lives determining, in this case, the ways that participants think and speak about listening and communicating with others.

**Practice skills.** Results also highlighted a compatibility between the training theme *practice skills* and the participant theme *training-to-practice gap*. Unpacking this comparison found that the issue of legitimacy in training was highlighted in the training as well as in the perceived needs of the participants which was reviewed previously through the extensive discussion of trialability and role play designs. In addition, the training theme of *practice skills* also incorporated the aspect of practice in a safe environment. Although these two issues (legitimacy and safety) are unique, they are also connected.
In order for opportunities for practice (including those linked closely to the realistic professional environments) to take place with success, it was imperative that participants felt safe trying the newly learned skills and comfortable making mistakes. If the training environment does not provide this security, it is unlikely that participants would be willing to actively participate in the role-plays. The fear of losing face would outweigh any advantages to trying out the new skills. This aspect of a safe environment for skill practice was found in the training materials, especially in the presentations and reflection sessions led by trainers.

The trainers were particularly good at recognizing the enthusiasm for this participant group to seek out humor in situations and the way this humor established a higher level of trust with the participants. Creating this safe environment began in the introductory session and was carried throughout the atmosphere of all the sessions during the week. The trainers told funny stories and were sarcastic where appropriate. They often highlighted one particular participant who was a real pain in the role-plays (everyone agreed). Trainers were willing to make fun of themselves and speak lightly of their former experiences where the mediations had been very difficult and where perhaps they had made mistakes. All of these actions built trust with the participants and formed a safe space where the new skills could be practiced without fear of making errors.

**Attend to work environment.** In contrast, the fifth theme from the training *attend to work environment* highlighted a case of incompatibility with the participant subtheme of *neutral position* (subtheme within the *need for communication skills* theme).

Those participants who work within the correctional division deal with issues that have very specific boundaries and limitations. Within this division there is no flexibility or
room for interpretation in many of the rules that are established for employees. One example is the rule that correctional officers are not allowed to have relationships with the inmates. Breaking this rule is cause for immediate dismissal. There is no flexibility in the interpretation of this policy. Yet, because every situation is different, there have been circumstances where the rule was broken and a grievance was then filed by the officer. This grievance then initiated the mediation process. Through mediation the individual who had broken the rule may be given the opportunity to voice their concerns about aspects of the dismissal. Although the process of mediation did not change the flexibility or outcome of the rule it may provide an opportunity for discussion. Participants from this division perceived a strong incompatibility between the policies that encompass their work environment and their desires for skills to maintain a neutral position. The transformation to the role of a mediator was thwarted by the difficulty of removing their correctional division hat to learn an important skill needed for mediation. In this example, the extent to which an individual had internalized existing values, rules, and policies of their organizational environment impacted the transfer experience.

This example bears a close resemblance to the research on emotion control by Tracy (2005), who examined correctional officers and the ways in which they put on an act and suppressed certain emotions as a way to manage the expectation for their job; “the expression of feeling in correctional atmospheres is seen as an occupational hazard” (Tracy, 2005, p. 262), and the officers controlled this through the construction of an emotional façade. Those participants from the current study who served in the correctional division had been directed to suppress any emotional responses in order to be successful in their roles; they had learned
to do so as a member of this specific culture. And although mediation is a process welcomed by the correctional division, the need for neutrality as a mediator went against the emotion control they had mastered over the years in these positions and work environment. This example highlighted the significance of incompatibility between the training and the participant expectations for transfer. The examination of both compatibility and incompatibility between training and participant themes has important implications for practice and a broader understanding of the transfer process.

**Limitations**

Despite the significant amount of narrative data gathered in this study and the extensive training material provided by the trainers, the overall number of participants in the study limits the generalization of the study results. The study was limited to one training event over a one-week period. While participants were interviewed twice (pre- and post-training), the study was not longitudinal. Because mediation is a special context, following up with participants only three months after the training may not have provided the participants with enough time for adequate mediation experience that would allow them to reflect as deeply on transfer. It would have been interesting to follow these participants and their experiences of transfer one year or more after the training.

Additionally, all of the participants in the training program were selected to attend the training by their direct supervisors. As such, these individuals came to the training (and the pre-training interviews) with a motivation and commitment to learning that may not have existed if the participants were forced or asked to attend the training based on poor performance issues on the job site. Because participants considered this training to be an
exclusive professional development in their careers, and they were enthusiastic about the
opportunity and distinction of being asked to serve as future mediators for the state, it is
likely that motivation to continue to implement the newly learned skills was a significant
factor in training transfer (Weissbein, Huang, Ford, & Schmidt, 2011). While this training
case may have unique features, the insights generated should be transferable to other
organizational training contexts in which participation is voluntary and trainees see the
advantages to learning the curriculum. This leads to discussion of theoretical and practical
implications.

**Implications**

Cheng and Hampson (2008) suggested, “the trainee should be the focal point of future
transfer research” (p. 335). Setting out to make an important contribution to research on
training transfer, this study focused on gathering a deeper, more robust concentration of
narrative data from training participants regarding their experiences of transfer. Narratives
from participants have rarely been collected in training studies, as previous methods of data
collection focus primarily on survey responses regarding transfer. These participant
narratives offer a glimpse of what is happening in transfer, and the results of the data analysis
provides theoretical and practical implications that may assist in the future facilitation of
successful transfer of skills.

**Implications for trainee characteristics.** To date, only two studies have made
connections between training transfer and diffusion of innovations (Gilpin-Jackson & Bushe,
2007; Kohles, et al., 2013), despite their calls for future research to more fully examine these
connections. Results from the current study demonstrated that training can be framed as an
innovation, and that characteristics such as relative advantage, trialability, compatibility, and complexity are likely to have a demonstrable impact on training transfer. Previous studies in training transfer indicated the effects of pre-training motivation on the transfer of skills, and the results of this study have showed that, where participants perceived compatibility, they were motivated to transfer the skills. Viewing transfer through the lens of the characteristics of diffusion of innovation offers a substantial addition to the current theories of pre-training motivation and training transfer. When participants viewed training skills as compatible with their personal and professional environments, motivation played a large role in their experiences of transfer; compatibility of values and needs were motivational factors.

Similarly, when participants perceived a relative advantage of using the skills from training across multiple contexts of their lives, they were more likely to desire successful transfer of the skills and, as such, recognized the need and were motivated to maintain the transfer. Not only were the mediation skills compatible with the values and needs of the participants, but they were motivated to transfer because they saw advantages to the continued use and mastery of these skills. For example, participants indicated there was an advantage to having completed the mediation training because colleagues in the workplace then saw them as individuals who they could trust; in some cases, as individuals who were leaders on the team. As such, the participants’ experience of transfer was impacted by the advantage of using the skills and subsequently affected the participants’ motivation to continue and maintain transfer. The results of this study have shown how drawing upon the theory of diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1983) expands upon the existing training transfer theory.
In order to strengthen the connections between the important trainee characteristics and the experience of transfer, it would be tremendously beneficial for trainers to begin building relationships and trust with the participants in advance of the training. Specifically, it would be beneficial for the customization of the training design to survey the participants in advance, asking about their values and expectations for transfer, not just what they want to do in the training. If trainers have a firm grasp of what participants value, what type of motivating factors are leading them to the training, and how they hope to use the skills from the training back in their workplaces and personal lives, there will be a better opportunity to accurately develop perceptions of compatibility and relative advantage.

**Implications for training design.** Participant themes regarding the transfer experience also provide practical implications for participant selection, training design, and transfer in the organizational environment. These findings may apply to any context where people apply these types of learned skills back to their different environments.

The idea of a script, discussed in the participant narratives, poses a conundrum for not only training participants but for trainers and those designing training programs as well. No mediation situation is boilerplate or textbook in its formation, its participants, and how the communication flow occurs. To suggest in a training program specific or exact language (outside of mediator introductions) that might be appropriate for any given mediation or conflict situation is nearly impossible. It is reasonable and understandable for training participants to desire this tool; what better way to gain confidence in personal mediation skills than by having a handbook of sorts or a resource to turn to in the heat of the moment that would provide a guaranteed path to resolution. This kind of script would also feel like
“successful” transfer: if I come away from this with the exact right words, then I know how to use the skill. But training for social skills is significantly different than training for task performance. There is not a single formula (or script) that can be used to achieve mastery of a social skill. Therefore, the training design must force participants to do most of the work. This concept of active training (Silberman, 2006) will also begin to build the connections made by participants with the values of the training which can then strengthen the future application and understanding of the skill.

The concept of reflection may be key to the maintenance of the personal connections that have been emphasized by training participants as elements for successful transfer. This type of reflection could be offered even more prominently in the training design (through specific coaching sessions with each participant following role plays and other interactive sessions) but may also be made available to the training participants after the completion of the training program. An example of this concept in action is Jones and Brinkert’s (2008) method of conflict coaching. Conflict coaches mentor those attempting to transfer important conflict management skills in the reality of their workplaces. And because these coaches are often members themselves of the organizations, they are fully aware of the culture, the climate, and the specific nuances of the situations. Those participants who are able to reflect upon their actions, choices, and words may then be more successful at transferring the skills within the culture of the organization.

Post-training coaching provides an opportunity of tremendous value in the aspect of follow-up. Participants can get in touch with coaches following the training and reflect on the skills they are attempting to use in the workplace, where they believe they may have had
strengths and weaknesses in the process, where skills from the training did or did not work, and how they might make their next experience more successful. The process of working closely with a coach - another experienced member of the organization - regarding what to do in situations, what to say, and reflections of how an individual may have used the skills from training, may assist participants in reaching the final stage of the innovation process, what Rogers (1983) defined as routinizing. This last stage of the adoption of an innovation (the training skills) is reached when the innovation has become incorporated into the organization. In the case of training, routinizing occurs through successful transfer of the skills. And the results of this study suggested that experiences of transfer are considered more successful by participants when they are given the opportunity to try out the skills (trialability) and work closely with individuals who have extensive experience in the actual workplace environment, part of the concept of legitimate peripheral participation by Lave and Wenger (1991).

To date, coaching of this depth is typically found only in the organizational setting; individuals work with a coach once they are back in their workplace environment. But coaching as an element of pre-training design is worth serious consideration. Creating coaching partnerships between participants at the onset of the training would foster important connections between the participants, connections that are crucial for encouraging a training environment that is safe and comfortable for participants. Making these types of connections prior to the training may offer opportunities for increased motivation for transfer. In addition, if participants are given the chance to serve as coaches during the training, at the same time that they themselves are working with a coach, they are presented with opportunities
throughout the training where they are experiencing the use of learned skills from two important perspectives; if each participant serves as a coach, they are looking at how their partner may use the skills more effectively, where they can improve, and where the individual is strongest in the use of the skills. As the recipient in the coaching partnership, the participant also views the trained skills from the perspective of user asking what can I do better, what did I do right or wrong in that last role play?

The apprentice model used by the State for this mediation training also provided an important example of how coaches or, in this case, the experienced mediators build upon this role as opinion leaders of the organization. Rogers (1983) defined opinion leaders as individuals in a position “earned and maintained by the individuals’ technical competence, social accessibility, and conformity to the organization’s norms” (p. 27). The unique nature of this apprentice model places participants with veteran mediators who are opinion leaders within the organization. But in forming this apprenticeship, the model also cultivates the next generation of opinion leaders. After returning to the workplace environment, continuing to transfer the skills and model the behaviors learned in training, the participants themselves will serve as experienced mediators in future apprentice training processes. And in doing so, they will then assist in the process of routinization (Rogers, 1983) for future (new) members of the organization. In this way, a training model which incorporates the use of coaches or other experienced members of the organization is a training design which has the ability to impact not only the participant’s experience of transfer but the organizational culture as well.

Continuing to update and closely monitor the elements of the training design must be a priority in the development of any type of training program. For example, role-play
sessions that were effective two years ago may not necessarily coincide with the experiences that a particular training group will experience in their workplace realities. Design implications must focus on the concepts of trialability (Rogers, 1983) and legitimate peripheral participation and practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as they are customized to the actual needs and practices of the training participants. The training design observed during this study is exemplary as these types of improvements and customizations to the training design were developed in a close partnership between OSHR and CDSS. It is an important example of the success of a user-centered approach to design and suggests that future designs for training, in general, consider the creation of design elements such as role plays and question and answer sessions, with the specific knowledge of the participants.

This model (apprentice model) could be applied to other social skill training, such as leadership training, where training participants would be paired with current organizational leaders both during and after the program. Participants would have the opportunity to work closely with the current organizational leader to learn specific ways to manage personnel, take initiative, and initiate productive change. Role play opportunities or case study examples developed by the current organizational leaders would be advantageous to training participants as more legitimate practice for the skills learned from the training.

The ways in which this study drew upon the participant experiences as well as the expertise of the trainers provided access to inside perspectives of the tools and skills that are currently in need from training program designs.

**Implications for training outcomes.** Who is accountable for successful training transfer? In addition to the efforts made by training participants to transfer learned skills,
should supervisors and/or managers be responsible for promoting transfer? Instead of sending an employee to a training program solely for individual professional development, consider how the training of new skills may enhance or create positive change in the broader organization. With that in mind, managers and supervisors should consider participating in training whenever possible in order to better understand what is needed for transfer of skills to be successful. In addition, managers and supervisors may consider providing options to the employees that offer opportunities for reflection of skills (through discussion or additional responsibilities like writing a piece for the company newsletter) once the employee returns.

The experience of transfer may be seen as a potential mechanism of change within the organization. The ways in which participants experience transfer affects the organizational environment where the transfer is happening and may also have an impact on the organizational culture and how the training participants view their role within the culture.

**Future Research**

Future research on training transfer will benefit from longitudinal studies that are designed to follow participants to observe and track what happens over time with transfer of skills. Observation of the actual transfer of skills three months after training, six months after training, and one year or more after training would add another layer of data that would demonstrate how skills from the training have been maintained.

Research that focuses on Rogers’ (1983) characteristic of observability would also make an important addition to our understanding of the experience of skill transfer. Data gathered from other organizational members (those who did not participate in the training) to examine how the training skills may have been observed in the workplace environment will
assist in the overall comprehension of how innovations (training skills) are adopted. Consideration of this additional data may help in future training design to address how the skills may be shared with other members of the organization.

Additionally, decisions about what organizational training will be made available and who has access to the training are deeply entrenched in issues of organizational power. The scope of this study does not address how training messages are inherently a form of organizational control or other power issues at play and how these may impact the transfer experience, but this is an important avenue for future research. Additional research would help to better understand the complexity and impact of organizational power on transfer.

Conclusion

This study has made contributions to the understanding of the experiences of training transfer and the connections between the concept of transfer and diffusion of innovations. First and foremost, by gathering extensive narratives from training participants, both before and after mediation training, this study provided a level of detail and information about the transfer experience that had yet to be presented. Despite calls for future research in the training field (Gilpin-Jackson & Bushe, 2007; Kohles, et al., 2013) to learn more about what is happening when training participants return to their work environments and often struggle to transfer learned skills, this is the first study to “follow” training participants before, during, and after the training program gathering their stories about what is happening in transfer.

The detail provided by the participant narratives, observation of the training program, and analysis of the training materials offered key information about the compatibility participants feel between their values and the values of the training. With this new and deeper
understanding of the experience of transfer, training research and practice may continue to successfully cultivate important advancements in the field.
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