Professional Development

Perceptions of Professional Identity Development From Counselor Educators in Leadership Positions

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The perceptions of professional identity development from 10 counseling leaders were examined through consensual qualitative research methodology. Themes and implications include the (a) intersection of being counselor educators and leaders in the counseling field and (b) the development and strengthening of professional identity over time.

Keywords: professional identity, counseling leaders, counselor education

Scholars have highlighted the importance of a unified professional identity (Gale & Austin, 2003; McLaughlin & Boettcher, 2009; Myers, Sweeney, & White, 2002) that emphasizes a philosophical orientation unique to the counseling profession (Mellin, Hunt, & Nichols, 2011). Debates have surfaced about the identity of the counseling profession, whether it is one cohesive profession or an array of therapeutic specialties among related helping disciplines (Gale & Austin, 2003; Remley & Herlihy, 2014). Brott and Myers (1999) defined *professional identity* as a cognitive frame of reference from which counselors perform professional roles and responsibilities. Much of the continuing focus has been on the growing need to explore and enhance professional identity of counselors (Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014). Recently, counseling scholars have also initiated the discussion on professional identity development of counselor educators (e.g., Calley & Hawley, 2008; Healey & Hays, 2011), because they play a crucial role in the counseling profession by educating the next generation of counselors and transmitting various aspects of their professional identity to their students. Counselor educators lead the future direction of the counseling profession through publication, self-proclaimed identity, and professional advocacy efforts (Calley & Hawley, 2008). As with other disciplines, counselor educators are accountable to convey the significance of a professional identity to others while operating in many professional and leadership roles (Calley & Hawley, 2008; West, Bubenzer, Osborn, Paez, & Desmond, 2006).

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Although counselor educators have significant influence on the professional identity of developing counselors and the profession as a whole, professional identity development has predominantly centered on master's-level counselors-in-training (Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003; Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010; Shores, 2011), master's-level counseling practitioners (Mellin et al., 2011), and doctoral-level counseling students (Dollarhide, Gibson, & Moss, 2013; Limberg et al., 2013). Only recently have topics such as who counselor educators are (e.g., training background, affiliation status with counseling organizations, and counseling theory orientation), and how they transmit their professional identity in teaching (e.g., modeling and discussing the professional identity of students) appeared in the counseling literature (e.g., Calley & Hawley, 2008). More research on the professional identity development of counselor educators is needed for the continued growth and development of the counseling profession, particularly the identity development of counselor educators in leadership positions.

Roles of Counselor Educators in Development of Counselor Professional Identity

Counselor educators communicate various aspects of their professional identity with developing counselors as well as with professional colleagues throughout their career. First, counselor educators influence the development of professional identity in emerging counselors through teaching and supervision (see Ritchie, 1990). Counselor educators demonstrate various aspects of their self-proclaimed professional identity by designing the learning environment in courses, selecting educational materials, and providing resources (see Calley & Hawley, 2008; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Educational Related Programs [CACREP], 2016). Thus, counselor training programs have a professional counseling identification, wherein counseling students learn about professional identity from counselor educators within their programs (Zimpfer, Mohdzain, West, & Bubenzer, 1992).

Second, counselor educators mentor students and other counseling professionals in developing their own professional identities when they share common professional contexts and experiences (Austin, 2002) through an interactive socialization process (Austin, 2002; Black, Suarez, & Medina, 2004; Borden, 2007). According to Black et al. (2004), mentoring can take place during informal conversations, teaching, supervision, and professional engagement activities (e.g., conference presentations) where socialization is involved. During these times, salient elements of professional identity, such as understanding the counseling professional's various roles (Remley & Herlihy, 2014); counseling's philosophical assumptions (e.g., a prevention and wellness orientation; Gale & Austin, 2003); and personal/professional values, attitudes, and behaviors (LaFleur, 2007; McGowen & Hart, 1990; Spruill & Benshoff, 1996) can be shared with other professionals. These interactions orient counseling members into the profession and promote their professionalism (Choate, Smith, & Spruill, 2005).

Third, many counselor educators rise to leadership positions within the counseling field and may influence the professional identity of others and the profession on a macrolevel. Leadership training is part of counselor education programs (Lockard, Laux, Ritchie, Piazza, & Haefner, 2014). Many professionals describe engagement through leadership as a core aspect of professional identity (Myers et al., 2002). Luke and Goodrich (2010) found that participants perceived their Chi Sigma Iota (CSI) leadership to be catalytic for professional identity growth. They voiced that leadership in CSI provided a link to professional associations and their professional development as counselors, including their current engagement in local and international professional organizations.

Fourth, leadership within the counseling profession encompasses service roles and positions (Meany-Walen, Carnes-Holt, Barrio Minton, Purwell, & Pronchenko-Jain, 2013; Storlie, Parker-Wright, & Woo, 2015; Storlie & Wood, 2014), which can be conceptualized as occurring along a continuum. In these roles, counselor educators serve as professional advocates, contributing to the collective identity of the counseling profession (Gale & Austin, 2003). Taken together, counselor educators are instrumental to the professional identity development of developing counselors as well as professional colleagues. In addition, professional identity formation and development is a process rather than an outcome, which, in other words, commences from training and continues throughout one's professional career (Brott & Myers, 1999)

Purpose of the Study

The literature related to factors influencing professional identity development in counselors-in-training (e.g., Auxier et al., 2003; Gibson et al., 2010; Shores, 2011) is well developed. There is a gap, however, in the counseling literature on the perceptions and experiences of professional identity development among counselor educators who train future counselors. Existing research has not examined the combined influence of education/training, involvement in professional activities, and mentoring practices that contribute to counselor educators' professional identity development; particularly for counselor educators in leadership positions. Furthermore, questions on how these specific factors affect counselor educators' roles as leaders in the counseling profession still remain. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how counselor educators who are in leadership roles within the counseling profession perceive their professional identity development by using consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill, Knox, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Hill et al., 2005) methodology. CQR permits in-depth examination of individual experiences through the use of a research team to present multiple perspectives in analysis and the application of rigor throughout the consensus process (Hill et al., 2005). The research question was, How do counselor educators in counseling leadership positions perceive their professional identity development?

Method

Participants

Participants were 10 counselor educators who identified as former/current presidents of professional counseling associations (i.e., American Counseling Association [ACA] and Association for Counselor Education and Supervision [ACES]) between 1992 and 2012. Five participants identified as male and five as female, and they ranged in age from 40 to 65 years (M = 53.5 years, SD = 6.88). Six served as past/current presidents of ACA and eight served as presidents of ACA divisions. We chose presidents of professional counseling organizations because of the direct influence they inherently hold as visible leaders in the profession of counseling. They obtained their master's degree in programs such as mental health counseling (n = 2); rehabilitation education (n = 1); community counseling (n = 3); school counseling (n = 3); counseling and personnel services (n = 1); student affairs (n = 1); rehabilitation counseling (n = 1); and marital, couple, and family counseling (n = 1). (Numbers exceed 10 because one person obtained his master's degree in four different specialty programs.)

Seven participants had received their doctoral degrees in counselor education and supervision (six of the programs were CACREP accredited), two in counseling psychology, and one in family studies with a cognate in counselor education. Seven were working in CACREP-accredited counselor education programs at the time of study, although all had been counselor educators during their career. Participants held various counseling licenses and/or certifications: Licensed Professional Counselor (n = 8), National Certified Counselor (n = 6), Licensed Psychologist (n = 3), and other counseling licenses/certifications (n = 5). Seven participants held more than one counseling license. Eight participants indicated they plan to remain as counselor educators in the university setting, one pursued a dean position, and one aimed for an administrative role within a professional counseling association.

Research Team

The research team comprised three researchers teaching in counselor education programs accredited by CACREP. We represented counselor educators from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Thus, we discussed our major assumptions prior to engaging with the data and agreed that a strong professional identity as a professional counselor was essential for leaders in the counseling field. The first author has served as a committee member or chair at the program, department, college, and (inter)national levels. The second author has held various leadership positions as an officer within various state, regional, national, and international counseling associations. The third author was a program coordinator for his department, was actively involved in a task force committee on teaching, and was a cochair for an interest network for the ACES. We further shared our own experiences with the development of our professional identity as counselors (and as counselor educators) and discussed the visibility of a strong professional

identity within our respective programs/departments. By disclosing these biases prior to the start of the study, we acknowledged that, as researchers, we were human instruments and our experiences may influence how we engage with the data (Patton, 2002).

Data Collection

Prior to participant recruitment, we obtained approval from the appropriate institutional review board. Initially, we developed a pool of potential participants who had served as president for counseling associations (i.e., ACA and ACES) in the last 20 years. These potential participants ($n = 35$; after eliminating duplicates and those who were deceased) were chosen because they were serving or had served in professional counseling associations that acknowledge the significance of strong counselor professional identities. Individuals in the participant pool received an invitation e-mail listing the purpose of the study and a link to a website where each person could respond to demographic and interview questions. We used this approach because (a) it increased the likelihood of participant anonymity; (b) it was time and cost effective (Jowett & Peel, 2009); and (c) it was flexible and convenient for respondents—busy participants often systematically ignore taking part in interviews but are more willing to answer questions on their own schedule (Duffy, Smith, Terhanian, & Bremer, 2005).

After 2 weeks, additional solicitation e-mails were sent out to the pool of potential participants. Ten individuals chose to participate, satisfying sample size requirements to use CQR methodology (Hill et al., 2005). Upon receiving responses, we developed a document with tabulation of a participant's initial responses. Then, follow-up questions were generated and sent to each participant to obtain further explanation or clarification on certain responses. For example, some follow-up questions included: (a) Do you think counselor professional identity is different from counselor educator professional identity? (b) If so, what are the similarities and differences between counselor and counselor educator professional identity? and (c) If not, what are the common characteristics/features of counselor and counselor educator professional identity? Via e-mail, participants reviewed the document and provided additional information and comments as requested. Through these two rounds of data collection, all participants confirmed their responses, and the information was finalized.

Measures

The research questionnaire was composed of two sections. The first section included demographic questions, future career plans, and e-mail address for member checking (Patton, 2002). The second section included one main open-ended interview question: How do you perceive your own professional identity development? Then, guided by the literature on professional identity development (Borden, 2007; Calley & Hawley, 2008; Gale & Austin, 2003; Healey & Hays, 2011; Kaplan & Gladding, 2011), we included five additional questions to examine students' reasons for choosing their

doctoral program, differentiation between counselor education and other helping professions, factors influencing their professional identity, thoughts on how their professional identity will continue to develop, and suggestions for students to enhance their professional identity. Prior to data collection, the first author's research mentor, who had expertise in CQR methodology, reviewed the questions. This mentor was a faculty member at a CACREP-accredited counselor education program and had authored peer-reviewed publications on the topic of counseling professional identity. Therefore, the mentor was qualified to provide feedback on the clarity of the questions in order for the research team to comprehensively capture the experiences of professional identity development among participants.

Data Analysis

We chose CQR as the methodological framework for this study to capture the emergence of salient themes and concepts that have influenced the professional identity development of counseling leaders in a systematic fashion. CQR is a systematic, rigorous research methodology that embraces the use of multiple researchers to uncover common domains within qualitative data (Hill et al., 1997, 2005). CQR is considered a constructivist and postmodern methodology in which individuals use cognitive processes to construct their worldview (Andrews, 2012). Moreover, CQR supports gathering data through the use of open-ended questions to understand the context of participant experiences (Hill et al., 1997, 2005).

We used Hill et al.'s (1997, 2005) approach for case definition and coding. Initially, we defined each "case" as each participant's respective narrative responses to both the open-ended and follow-up questions. Next, we followed Hill et al.'s guidelines and individually coded two of the 10 cases using the specific domains that surfaced after reading the data. After coding the first 2 cases, we came together to discuss our individual coding. The second author facilitated the first consensus meeting, which lasted 90 minutes. During this meeting, each researcher discussed his or her reasoning for identifying and selecting domains within the data. On the basis of the first two cases, we developed the consensus version of the domains and then coded the remaining eight cases using the consensus domains as a guide.

From our conversation during the first consensus meeting, the first author developed the abstracts of the core ideas (Hill et al., 1997) for deeper definition and understanding of our consensus domains. The second and third authors reviewed the abstracts to reach consensus and revisited our original assumptions to monitor biases. After agreement was reached by all three authors, we coded the remaining eight cases using the agreed-upon domains. Upon our completion of all 10 cases, we met for a second consensus meeting that lasted 120 minutes. The second author facilitated consensus meetings for procedural consistency and to assure that all authors presented cases consistently at each meeting. This consistency included adherence to Hill et al.'s (1997, 2005) suggestion of rotating between research team members on who talks first in order for all members to lead and to be heard. Then,

we cross-analyzed our respective codes to develop larger categories from a discovery-oriented perspective (Hill et al., 1997, 2005). Through consensus-building discussions, we collaboratively refined, collapsed, and combined domains to capture the core ideas across interviews.

Results

Table 1 shows a summary of domains, categories of each domain, and frequency (i.e., general and typical) and illustrates the prevalence of each phenomenon across all cases. *General* applies to all of the cases; *typical* applies to half or more of the cases; *variant* applies to one or two cases (there were no variant cases in the study). To protect participants' identities, we used pseudonyms in presenting raw data.

Mentorship

Nine participants reported that mentors played an important role in their counselor professional identity development. As seasoned professionals in counseling fields (including counseling psychology), mentors assisted participants in searching for appropriate graduate programs and career decision making when choosing to become counselor educators. Through their respective mentoring experiences, participants perceived a solid orientation to counseling and counselor education. For example, Emily (Participant 3) recalled: "My mentor . . . first introduced me to the counseling field when I had originally planned to pursue clinical psychology. He is without a doubt the reason I went down the path to becoming a counselor and counselor educator." Likewise, Mary (Participant 2) commented "No matter who they were and what shape the relationship took, completing some work with mentors helped to build a strong identity as a future counselor educator."

Participants perceived that strong mentorship helped to enhance and refine their professional identity, which in turn supported their growth into successful counselor educators who eventually went on to mentor future generations of counselors. Given the influence mentors had on participants' professional development, many participants went on to suggest counselor education students find mentors/professionals with a strong professional identity and to work closely with them. Jim (Participant 5) suggested that

TABLE 1

Counselor Educators' Perceptions of Professional Identity

Domain and Category	General (*n*)	Typical (*n*)
Mentorship		9
Goodness of fit		9
Professional engagement and contribution	10	
Roles in addition to clinical practice	10	
Development and holistic identity		
Ongoing development	10	
Complexity	10	
Leading is a part of the job		9

Note. General applies to all of the cases. Typical applies to half or more of the cases.

counsel or education students develop a strong professional identity by "being mentored by faculty with strong counseling identities and connecting an individual's identity with the group's and profession's identity."

Goodness of Fit

Nine participants identified that elements of their counselor professional identity were due to the congruence between their values and their chosen graduate program's/profession's expectations. Participants noted that their character and personality aligned with the philosophy of counselor education and supported the development of strong counselor identities. Kelly (Participant 8) stated, "Counselor education being wellness-based was much more aligned with my values and career aspirations so I chose it rather than counseling psychology." Likewise, John (Participant 6) voiced that "I decided to move to counseling for PhD work because the entire profession is based on humanistic ideals, and the move was seamless and natural to me. Also, the PhD in counseling is dedicated to developing educators and supervisors."

Lisa (Participant 1) expressed a similar thought: "The fact that the professors conducted research in school and mental health agency settings fit my ideas about community engagement." Jim (Participant 5), whose terminal degree was in counseling psychology, reported experiencing individual challenges in finding a good fit with a professional identity as a psychologist. He described his experience with psychologists as a mismatch because of his personal values in prevention, development, and wellness. He reported a bond to the ideals and mission of the counseling profession. In general, participants selected counselor education as a career choice over other mental health professions (e.g., clinical psychology) based on a match between their personal values and the profession's philosophy.

Professional Engagement and Contribution

All participants acknowledged that engaging in professional counseling activities at various settings and levels, such as within their graduate program(s), beyond the university setting (e.g., communities), in state/national level counseling associations, and through scholarly publications, were instrumental in their professional growth and counselor identity development. Jim (Participant 5) believed that "Professional identity develops when individuals are provided with the opportunity to take on participatory roles that help them influence others." Nine participants emphasized the importance of being engaged specifically in counselor education activities. Emily (Participant 3) described: "Attending a CACREP-accredited program, spending time with counselor educators via courses, being an active member of professional associations and being involved in advocacy efforts . . . help me when I stand up for our profession and myself."

Similarly, Karen (Participant 7) reported that memberships in professional organizations, possession of a counseling credential, and personally choosing to identify as a counselor influenced her professional identity development. Jason (Participant 4) reported, "The research and leadership programs

coming out of ACA on multiple levels helped me grow as a professional in optimal ways . . . they have made a major difference for the good of the profession in defining professional identity." Jim (Participant 5) echoed, "Being involved in developing counseling standards helped me in strengthening my identity as a professional counselor: I was able to articulate a clear direction and mission for the counseling programs and profession."

Roles in Addition to Clinical Practice

For all the participants, leadership and professional identity expanded beyond counseling practice and included a strong education/pedagogy, clinical supervision, research, and service. For example, Kelly (Participant 8) noted she publishes only in counseling journals and advocates for the counseling profession with state licensure boards and other national advocacy. Similarly, Mary (Participant 2) perceived the multiple roles of counselor educators as being

> Responsible for ensuring the quality of those entering the profession, so we have a duty to act as gatekeepers as well. We serve as role models for our students, and therefore have a responsibility to stay current on issues affecting counselors and those we serve, as well as to push the boundaries of what we already know.

Participants described their relationships with current and future counselor educators as multifaceted, including elements of fellowship, supervision, and mentoring relationships. Mary (Participant 2) mentioned her responsibility to stay current on issues affecting the counseling profession, specifically research and service. Participants' statements indicated that they were responsible for demonstrating expert knowledge and skill sets to perform various professional roles as counselor educators, both of which (i.e., expertise and roles) were embraced within their professional identity formation.

Development and Holistic Identity

Two interrelated categories emerged within this domain. First, all participants reported their professional identity on a developmental continuum. Collectively, they recognized that counselor professional identity does not magically begin at the point of acceptance into a counselor education program but rather develops with ongoing orientation into the program and the profession. Through multiple forms of undertakings (e.g., preparation specifically in counselor education, collaborative relationships with counseling professionals, and service to the profession/public), participants perceived a solidification of their professional identity. Karen (Participant 7) commented that "professionalism and advocacy development in the doctoral courses as well as in the field, memberships in associations, . . . and continuing discussions with colleagues on counseling's identity" were influential in her identity development.

Participants conveyed that professional identity development was based on the work they do and who they serve. As Lisa (Participant 1) recalled, "It changed after I left university teaching. For me professional identity means advocating

for the profession of counseling and to assist our communities to understand what counselors do within their communities." Patrick (Participant 10), whose training was in counseling psychology, commented on the historical fact that counselor education programs were not available in his region of the country when seeking out doctoral study. He discussed witnessing how "organized psychology tried to limit the practice and licensing of professional counselor. . . . I understand the politics and worth of enhancing the professional identity of counselor educators and support this move by the profession."

The second category in this domain encompassed the complex multifaceted and holistic aspect of professional identity. All participants perceived professional identity to be associated with an individual's membership in a chosen field, which was congruent with the philosophy of the profession. Particularly, eight participants reported their counselor professional identity as unique, holistic, and different from that in other helping professions. For example, Patrick (Participant 10) voiced that

> We emphasize positive mental health and focus on strengths and adaptive strategies in our clients. We advocate for clients, and we emphasize the empowerment of individuals. We value preventive as well as ameliorative intervention efforts, and we work toward enhanced functioning of all people.

Despite the thread of individuation as a counseling profession illuminated by the majority of participants, two participants described their identity as being more inclusive of multiple identities across different counseling fields. Jim (Participant 5) reported,

> I support the idea of building bridges rather than walls. The clients that my students see and those I saw when practicing just want help. They don't care or want to create a staff of different helping professionals. They need someone who will help them navigate through the troubled waters and find resources they need. Increasing the division between counseling professions does not seem to be in their best interest. Understanding scope of practice and competence does, but increasing division does not.

Regardless of training backgrounds, participants' statements indicated that their professional identity holistically embraced and represented counseling philosophy and values.

Leading Is a Part of the Job

Participants, many of whom were later in their career, are nationally and internationally recognized leaders in the counseling field who for decades had served and advocated for the counseling profession. They appeared to be obligated to and comfortable in sharing their expertise and as part of their professional identity. Emily (Participant 3) expressed her view of leadership as follows,

> I have become a stronger voice advocating for the profession, especially as I see the need for the work of my students. My professional identity is positively impacted by my continued involvement in leadership. Now that my voice seems to be heard more because of establishing myself in the field, I believe I have a responsibility to use my voice to advocate for the profession even more.

Similarly, Mark (Participant 9) noted that "I have a greater ownership as a counselor educator and practicing licensed counselor and feel I am now a strong steward for my profession." Participants serving as presidents of counseling organizations recognized the contribution of those roles to their greater understanding (e.g., a broad view of the profession) of the counseling profession and reported a positive impact of those roles on their identities as leaders. As Jason (Participant 4) echoed, "My roles in leadership positions helped me develop the ability to formulate a clear image of the aspired future of counseling and counseling community."

Discussion

This study provides a unique lens of the developmental processes for counseling leaders who have a record of client and professional advocacy, which adds another perspective to existing research on professional identity development. Our study offers the direct perspectives of presidents of professional counseling organizations on their growth and professional identity processes. As elected leaders in professional counseling organizations, our participants shape the future of the profession by decision making during their presidencies. These findings suggest the importance of mentorship experiences, which helped our participants orient themselves into the profession at the early stage of their professional career, and influenced their professional identity development over time. Mentoring relationships are a key component in professional identity development, such that mentors help mentees identify personal strengths and explore professional identity issues (Lam & Chan, 2009). Furthermore, mentoring experiences affect counselor self-growth, promotion of well-being, empowerment, and adherence to professional ethics (Farrell, 2007). Mentors also serve as role models in many areas, such as teaching, research, counselor advocacy efforts, and professional engagement (Rorrer, 2009).

As participants gained support and guidance in their positions as counselor educators, they further developed and aligned with the values of the counseling profession. The counseling literature states that professional identity includes a congruence of oneself (e.g., personal characteristics, goals, and values) with the counseling profession (Auxier et al., 2003; Woo, Henfield, & Choi, 2014). Counseling professionals who have genuineness, personal goals, and values corresponding with the characteristics of the counseling profession will be more likely to have a strong professional identity (Remley & Herlihy, 2014). Our results were consistent with these notions.

For our participants, professional identity development included active engagement in professional activities. This is consistent with counseling research suggesting that professional identity includes being an active member of the profession (Healey & Hays, 2011; Woo et al., 2014). The professional membership of counseling associations was the most frequently noted influential factor having a positive impact on professional identity development among these participants. Hence, counseling associations need to develop

various ways for members to get involved. Activities may include offering more benefits for members and reducing fees for members in leadership roles, for example.

Participants communicated about the multiple, critical roles that affected their development of counselor professional identity. They passed on the meaning of a strong professional identity to students and other counseling professionals while in these various roles, through which they had an impact on the sustainability and advancement of professional identity of the counseling profession (Calley & Hawley, 2008). Remley and Herlihy (2014) suggested that counseling professionals with a strong, clear professional identity would understand the different roles, professional services, and functions they implement and how the roles are different from those of other helping professionals. Findings support intentional efforts to develop future counselor educators' integrative professional identity through effective training in the domains of teaching, supervision, research, and many other areas, including service while enrolled in counselor education doctoral programs (Lambie & Vaccaro, 2011; Nelson & Oliver, 2011).

All participants held the perspective that professional development was an ongoing process and would continue to be strengthened throughout their professional training and careers. Specifically, through both interpersonal (internalization of counseling philosophy and knowledge shared by counseling mentors and faculty members) and intrapersonal (immersion into the professional community's expectations and standards) processes (Gibson et al., 2010), participants grew into counselor educators with strong professional identities. These findings support the notion that professional identity emerges from a developmental process that facilitates professionals to reach an understanding of their chosen profession in association with their own self-concept. This further helps them to identify and express their values, philosophy, and roles to other people within and outside of their profession (Brott & Myers, 1999).

Participants reported that the guiding philosophy at the core of their professional identity was commonly characterized by developmental approach, wellness, prevention, empowerment, and advocacy. These are supported by the counseling literature as characteristics that distinguish the counseling profession from other mental health disciplines (Gladding & Newsome, 2004; Healey & Hays, 2011; Myers et al., 2002; Remley & Herlihy, 2014). Additionally, participants were decisive about the commonalities of various counseling specialties. This finding implies that participants' unique growth process and identity development cannot be understood as separated from a collective identity established within the profession. Consequently, the counseling profession would be strengthened as a whole as its members reach a strong sense of purpose and a unified identity (Gale & Austin, 2003).

Finally, this study demonstrates that counselor educators' ability to thrive in leadership roles develops over a long period, partly as a function of seeing the profession advance over time during their respective careers. Over time, participants reported an alignment of their values, leadership styles,

and viewpoints on the future of the profession. Consistent with our findings, leadership literature suggests that devotion and time spent at the group and organizational levels can be crucial in forming self-identity (Jenkins, 2008), and professional identity develops in the context of the life cycle of a leadership career (Ibarra, Wittman, Petriglieri, & Day, 2014). Thus, collectively in the counseling profession, it is necessary to be a forward thinker and discuss what is needed in future leadership and how leaders are defined in the counseling field.

Implications for Counselor Education

Counselor education programs could use our findings as a rationale to begin, strengthen, and continue mentorship initiatives. Participants recommended that students find mentors and build connections with them; however, we suggest that these mentorship relationships be reciprocal. That is, the onus of making connections to mentors should not always be on students. Counselor education programs are required to assign an academic advisor (CACREP, 2016). However, our findings suggest a more in-depth relationship with a mentor may have a greater positive impact on student development. For example, counseling faculty could assist students in connecting with mentors who also have strong professional identities and personality fit. Additionally, counselor education faculty need to discuss the effectiveness, barriers, and contributions of different mentoring forums in their programs. Examples of proactive mentorship include presenting with students at professional conferences and helping them connect with others in the profession to promote a sense of belonging. Moreover, professional counseling associations could expand mentorship training programs, such as the program within ACA, to help counseling faculty become effective mentors.

Despite the positive impact of holding a strong professional counselor identity, the risks of a diffuse professional identity within counselor education are evident. Counseling professionals are cautioned not to confuse active discussions of professional identity with unique individual identities, meaning professional identity conversations are collectivistic in nature (Gale & Austin, 2003).The *20/20 Principles for Unifying and Strengthening the Profession* postulated "sharing a common professional identity" as the first principle in advancing the counseling profession (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011, p. 372). Counselors and leaders need to continue the discussion of a unified professional identity of counseling and develop strategies to advance the profession. Counselor education programs should also include service learning projects in and out of the classroom (e.g., Day on the Hill, National Alliance on Mental Illness Walk) that can connect counselor professional identity, client, and professional advocacy. It is imperative to engage students in readings and discussions on how far we have come as a profession and how far we have yet to go.

As accrediting bodies, licensure boards, and counseling examinations become more standardized nationwide, counselors will be positioned to be accepted by society as equals to other professional helpers. Indeed, a

lack of clear professional identity for counselors is thought to adversely affect the quality of work output and overall image of the profession (e.g., Remley & Herlihy, 2014). Hence, a strong professional identity becomes an opportunity for professional advocacy and education for our professional colleagues, society, legislators, and policy makers. Professional counseling associations, such as ACA, could offer continuous educational opportunities for counseling professionals to encourage professional advocacy and identity. For example, given the growing attention to international counseling students and the globalization of counseling, counseling associations can further explore the unique professional identity developmental processes throughout the world, not just within the United States.

Limitations and Future Research

Although findings from this study contribute to the existing counseling literature on the topic of professional identity development in counseling professionals, a small sample size has a limitation in providing in-depth understanding of identity development of counseling leaders. Moreover, we acknowledge that participants who have been presidents of counseling organizations may have had unique factors that influenced their professional identity development. Future research may include opportunities to explore professional identity among leaders who choose to seek out less visible leadership roles. A parallel study would shed light on processes related to leadership development on the lower end of the continuum, or reasons why some counselor educators do not gravitate toward leadership positions. The online survey format was not able to capture participants' nonverbal communication to responses and may have further limited the breadth and depth of participant responses. Different data collection methods such as interviews, focus group, surveys, and observations could be also considered. Researchers could also explore and expand on challenges shared by counseling leaders, strategies used to navigate through challenging times, identity and leadership development models, and perceptions of how professional identity development affects roles as leaders in the field of counseling. Measuring professional identity and leadership effectiveness would enrich the understanding of how intentions are transmitted into actual performance at work as well.

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