

Research

Professional Identity Development: A Grounded Theory of Transformational Tasks of Counselors

Julie M. Moss, Donna M. Gibson, and Colette T. Dollarhide

The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory study was to investigate practicing counselors' professional identity development at nodal points during their career. Through the use of 6 focus groups of beginning, experienced, and expert counselors, 26 participants shared their experiences, and 6 themes emerged to form a theory of transformational tasks of professional identity development. Through these tasks, counselors encountered issues of idealism toward realism, burnout toward rejuvenation, and compartmentalization toward congruency.

Keywords: professional identity development, practicing counselors

Counselor professional identity encapsulates the idea of continuous growth and development within a certified context. Counselor growth and development is a continuous and lifelong process (Borders & Usher, 1992). It begins as individuals enter counseling training programs and continues until they retire. Professional identity is part of being a counselor (Gazzola & Smith, 2007; Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010) and is the integration of the professional self and personal self (including values, theories, and techniques). Personal attributes combine with professional training as a counselor forms his or her own professional identity. Within an ethical context, counselors rely on their professional identity as a frame of reference as they make decisions regarding their work with clients (Brott & Myers, 1999; Friedman & Kaslow, 1986; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992). In essence, counselor professional identity includes interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions.

Interpersonal dimensions of professional identity involve one's relationship to society and the professional community (Gibson et al., 2010). The professional community includes professional organizations, licensing boards and credentialing bodies, and accrediting agencies. Interpersonal aspects also involve the professional community of counselors. Emerging counselors learn about the culture of the counseling profession through supervision and experience (Dollarhide & Miller, 2006).

Professional identity is also shaped from within a person and comprises the intrapersonal dimensions of professional identity (Gibson et al., 2010). Personal definitions of counseling evolve, locus of evaluation changes, and reflection

becomes increasingly important as counselor identity is solidified. New professionals move from an external to an internal locus of evaluation and from a reliance on experts to a reliance on their own experience and training (Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003; Brott & Myers, 1999; Gibson et al., 2010; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). The majority of research pertaining to counselors' identity development centers on the professional identity development of counselors-in-training rather than working professional counselors (Auxier et al., 2003; Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006; Gibson et al., 2010; Nelson & Jackson, 2003; Woodside, Oberman, Cole, & Caruth, 2007). Theories of identity development of counselors-in-training (Auxier et al., 2003; Gibson et al., 2010) showed that through experience, course work, and a commitment to the profession, identity develops over time.

However, there is limited research about counselor identity development at various points in the career life span. Mellin, Hunt, and Nichols (2011) found that counselors believe their work to be different from other helping professions and that counselors' identity focused on a developmental, prevention, and wellness orientation. Several studies cite the need for greater information about the development of professional identity during the professional life span (Bischoff, Barton, Thober, & Hawley, 2002; Brott, 2006; Brott & Myers, 1999; Dollarhide, Gibson, & Moss, 2013; Gibson et al., 2010; Howard et al., 2006; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992). Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) provided a phase model that described "central processes of counselor/therapist development" (p. 5) from the novice professional to the senior

Julie M. Moss, Hand Middle School, Columbia, South Carolina; **Donna M. Gibson**, Department of Educational Studies, University of South Carolina; **Colette T. Dollarhide**, Department of Counselor Education and School Psychology, Ohio State University. Donna M. Gibson is now at Department of Counselor Education, Virginia Commonwealth University. This research was made possible through partial funding provided by a grant from the Chi Sigma Iota Counseling Academic and Professional Honor Society International. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Donna M. Gibson, Department of Counselor Education, School of Education, Virginia Commonwealth University, PO Box 842020, Richmond, VA 23284-2020 (e-mail: dgibson7@vcu.edu).

professional. The postgraduate professionals interviewed in their cross-sectional, grounded theory qualitative study had an average of 5, 15, and 25 years of professional experience with doctoral degrees in professional psychology. On the basis of the data, the following themes emerged: (a) There is an increasing higher order integration of professional and personal selves; (b) continuous reflection is required for optimal learning; (c) an intense commitment to learning drives development; (d) professional development is continuous, is lifelong, and can be erratic; (e) clients are influential to counselor development; (f) personal life experiences are influential to counselor development; (g) interpersonal sources (i.e., mentors, supervisors, counselors, peers, family) are influential to counselor development; and (h) thinking and feeling about the profession and clients change over time.

■ Conceptual Framework of Current Study

Although many of the professional identity development studies in the literature are focused on one specific type of population and at one point in time, a few longitudinal studies in other disciplines indicate that there are specific influences on professional identity development over time (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005; Monrouxe, 2009). Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2003) work provided a foundation for the current study. Because Rønnestad and Skovholt focused on postgraduates with doctoral degrees in professional psychology, for the current study, we determined that more research including participants who were professional counselors (with and without doctoral degrees) could determine if similar themes are experienced. Hence, we created a series of four separate cross-sectional studies to examine the professional identity development of individuals in the counseling profession. The four studies investigate counselors-in-training (Gibson et al., 2010), practicing professional counselors, doctoral students in counselor education programs (Dollarhide et al., 2013), and counselor educators. No data were used more than once in data analysis and reporting across the four studies. The cross-sectional design allowed us to determine what transformational tasks were occurring for these groups of participants and if longitudinal research was warranted for further study.

Transformational tasks describe the work counselors must accomplish at each stage of their professional life span. Counselors' professional identity is transformed in response to completing each task. For example, Gibson et al. (2010) found three transformational tasks that counselors-in-training must accomplish to develop a firm professional identity: defining counseling, transitioning responsibility for growth, and integrating a systemic identity. They found that course work, experience, and commitment were significant events as counselors-in-training moved from external validation to self-validation. These results led us to question if the transformation of counselor identity is mirrored in practicing counselors. Therefore, we posed the following question in

our study: What is the process of counselors' professional identity development at nodal points in their career life span as beginning, experienced, and expert counselors?

■ Method

For the current study, we used a grounded theory approach to generate an explanation of the process of professional identity development as it was viewed by the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A grounded theory approach was most appropriate for this study because it focused on developing an explanation of a process that involved many individuals. Other qualitative approaches did not allow a focus on the process. All participants in the study had experiences that related to professional identity development, and the research sought to explain the process (Creswell, 2007). The characteristics of grounded theory include the theory being grounded in data, use of a constant comparative method, the use of memo writing by the researchers, and theoretical sampling (Heppner & Heppner, 2004). The constant comparative method found in grounded theory enabled us to identify similarities and differences between school and community-based counselors' experiences.

Researchers and Trustworthiness

We were the primary instrument in the data collection. It is especially important to recognize our assumptions and biases in qualitative research because the data were filtered through our lenses (Heppner & Heppner, 2004). We controlled for this by first recognizing the assumptions and biases we held relating to counselors' professional identity development.

All three researchers are women. The first author, a middle school counselor and doctoral candidate, had participated in previous research relating to professional identity development. She has 7 years of experience as a school counselor at the elementary and middle school levels. The second author has 13 years of experience as a counselor educator and 8 years as a licensed professional counselor (LPC), and the third author has 20 years of experience as a counselor educator and 10 years as an LPC and school counselor.

When designing this study, we attempted to make the study more rigorous. Acknowledging biases, using multiple researchers during the coding process, and member checking helped ensure the trustworthiness of data analyses. Because this was a qualitative study, researcher biases were inherent. Among our biases was the belief that counselor identity is important to counselors and counselor educators. One of our central assumptions relates to professional identity and its progression during the course of one's career. That is, we believe that interactions with clients and colleagues, continued professional development, successes, and failures shape how counselors view themselves and their profession and that these ideas evolved from the beginning of graduate school until the present time. We anticipated that these ideas will continue to change as counselors' professional growth occurs.



To control for biases and to embrace subjectivity, we took field notes and wrote reflexive journals (Heppner & Heppner, 2004). After leaving the data collection sites, we used reflexive memo writing to write about emotions and reactions during the study. Memo writing was also used to write down ideas about the evolving theory during the data analysis process. Using three researchers during the coding process ensured that the themes and process formed were grounded in data. The use of multiple researchers added credibility by involving multiple perspectives, opinions, and experiences.

Participants had the opportunity to review our preliminary analysis and take part in member checking (Creswell, 2007). Some participants who noted that they would be available for follow-up questions were asked to review the initial data findings. Preliminary data were presented to the participants via e-mail.

Participants

We used stratified purposeful sampling to select participants for the study. This type of sampling identified the subgroups and allowed for comparison between the groups being studied (Creswell, 2007). Using Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2003) stratified sampling method, we invited school and community-based counselors (with an LPC or LPC intern credential) to participate and divided them into groups based on years of experience (i.e., 1–2, 5–15, and 20+ years). School counselors were solicited through a state mailing list and through local school districts. We obtained contact information for LPCs in the area from the state's Department of Labor and Licensing. Also, we used contact information for graduates from a local university.

Twenty-six participants met the criteria and were able to participate in the study. Demographic information was collected relating to participants' ethnicity, gender, highest degree earned, and work setting. Of the 26 participants, 15 were school counselors and 11 were community-based counselors. The majority of the participants were female ($n = 21$) and five were male. Twenty-two participants identified as White and four participants identified as African American. Their work settings varied among the groups. For the school groups, four were elementary counselors, six were middle school counselors, and five were high school counselors. Among community-based counselors, four worked in private practice; one worked in college counseling; two worked in a hospital setting; and one each worked in a residential treatment facility, a community college, a mental health center, and an employee assistance program.

Data Collection

Questions were developed based on research on professional identity development (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003) and the focus group questions used in Gibson et al.'s (2010) study. We designed questions to elicit participants' experience of their professional identity development during their

career. The questions addressed the following: definition of counseling and any changes over time, professional identity and factors that influenced it (i.e., Define your professional identity at the current moment), and needs to progress in their professional identity (i.e., What do you think you need to progress to the next level of development of your professional identity?). Data were collected through recorded focus groups that were scheduled in advance. The goal of this qualitative data collection was to capture rich descriptions of the process of professional identity development that accurately represented participants' lived experiences. The advantage of using focus groups for data collection is that it is more "socially oriented, often creating a more relaxed feel than individual interviewing" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 253). The combination of grouping participants by work setting, years of experience, and focus groups promoted robust exploration and processing of the topic. The processing that occurred in a focus group was essential to spark additional thoughts relating to professional identity. By hearing other counselors' experiences in similar work settings, participants gained insight into the construct of professional identity and could provide more meaningful answers to questions. Focus group sessions lasted 60 to 90 minutes.

The focus groups were formed on the basis of participants' experience and area of expertise. We avoided mixing people with different expertise or work settings because the goal was for all participants to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Being comfortable in the group increases the likelihood of participant involvement. The focus groups were formed and coded with letters A (for school and community-based counselors with 1–2 years of experience), B (for school and community-based counselors with 5–15 years of experience), and C (for school and community-based counselors with 20+ years of experience); this coding system is used in the Results section.

Data Analysis

After focus group interviews were completed, each session was transcribed verbatim. We used manual line-by-line open coding to focus on coding for differences based on years of experience and work setting and looked for concepts, categories, and properties that characterized each level of experience and setting. We agreed that participants did not differ on the basis of work setting. The idea of professional identity was conceptualized as a continuum (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The transcripts of counselors with 1–2 years of experience and those of counselors with 20+ years of experience were coded for concepts and categories to anchor the ends of the continuum. Next, the transcripts of counselors with 5–15 years of experience were coded.

In axial coding, the categories were refined as we sought to identify the causes, influences, outcomes, and consequences of counselors' identity development. Participant transitions were noted that would be used in the construction

of the grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Finally, we used selective coding to develop hypotheses to connect the ideas of professional identity development among counselors. A model or theory was developed from the information gathered (Creswell, 2007) that suggested transformational tasks specific to practicing counselors. These transformational tasks were different from the transformational tasks discovered in the previous studies (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Gibson et al., 2010).

Results

The findings from the analyses suggested that six themes were influential to counselors' professional identity development: (a) adjustment to expectations, (b) confidence and freedom, (c) separation versus integration, (d) experienced guide, (e) continuous learning, and (f) work with clients. Within three of the themes—adjustment to expectations, confidence and freedom, and separation versus integration—there was movement as counselors gained experience working. The other three themes—experienced guide, work with clients, and continuous learning—were catalysts for the movement that took place. Although the process was different from the process for counselors-in-training (Gibson et al., 2010), there were transformational tasks completed by counselors during nodal points in their counseling career that developed their professional identity. Within each of the groups, or career life stages, there was a transformational task that enabled the counselor to continue to grow and develop professionally (see Figure 1).

The three tasks were idealism toward realism, burnout toward rejuvenation, and compartmentalization toward congruency. Counselors were able to accomplish these tasks through the processes of continuous learning, work with clients, and help from an experienced guide. In this section, the results of the themes with counselors' quotes are presented. The section ends with an explanation of how the themes are integrated into the transformational tasks in the professional identity development of counselors.

Participants were identified with anonymous codes based on the group they were in: A = beginning counselors with 1–2 years of experience; B = experienced counselors with 5–15 years of experience; and C = expert counselors with 20+ years of experience. As mentioned earlier, participants did not differ by work setting; therefore, school counselors and community-based counselors are combined. Within each group, participants are assigned an identifying number (1, 2, 3, etc.). For example, C2 is the second counselor in the group of expert counselors with 20+ years of experience.

Themes and Theory

Adjustment to expectations. This theme represented the counselors' perceptions of their own expectations as counselors versus the expectations others had of them in this role. Counselors, especially beginning and experienced counselors, expressed frustrations about their work environment. Beginning counselors found reality different from the idealized role they had imagined. As years progressed, this frustration led to counselors in the middle of their career life span feeling dissatisfied

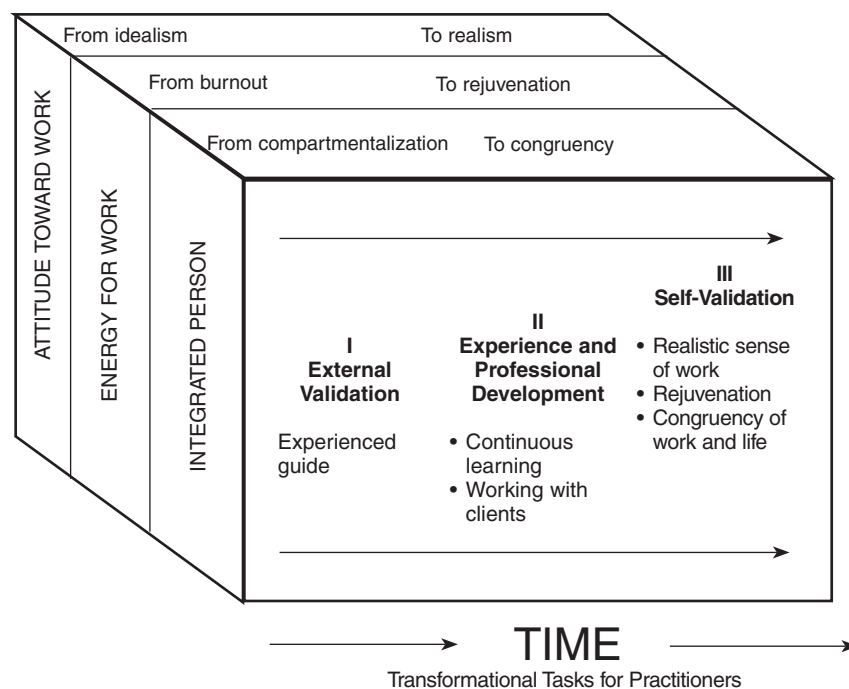


FIGURE 1

Professional Identity Development Model of the Transformational Tasks of Counseling Practitioners

with their jobs. Counselors were asked how their definition of counseling had changed for them, when it had happened, and if working as a counselor was what they imagined it would be.

Beginning counselors grappled with the realization that the realities of the workplace were different from graduate training. One beginning counselor said, "It is one thing when you are a student and there is someone actually kind of guiding you but when you are out there doing it on your own, that has definitely been an eye-opener" (A3). The idealized view counselors had developed during training was different from their actual job setting. Another beginning counselor stated, "Now that I am actually in the school system, it is a little bit different" (A2). These counselors reported feeling frustrated as they recognized the difference.

Counselors expressed frustration with noncounseling duties, administrative tasks, and paperwork. They reported realizing how these other tasks interfered with their actual counseling. As one beginning counselor explained, "I can't really get done what I want to get done and be as effective as I can be because I am constantly doing other things like paperwork" (A2). The counselors felt that these other organizations were dictating the services they provided and, as a result, defined counselors' identity. An experienced counselor said,

Where I work it is almost like the establishments that we work for really are defining our professional identity. . . . Insurance dictates what kind of crisis a patient really needs to be having in order to have the service they will pay for. (B13)

Experienced counselors were tired after years of confronting the same struggles and were in need of rejuvenation. One counselor shared,

I guess at this point in my career, I am feeling a bit I don't know if burned out is the word but I have gotten to where I am used to doing the same thing. . . . I feel like I used to have a lot more passion or hope than I do at this point. (B5)

After years of confronting these realities, expert counselors felt continued frustration, which led to job dissatisfaction.

Confidence and freedom. As participants discussed how they felt as counselors and what they needed to progress to the next level of development in their professional identity, beginning counselors expressed emerging doubts about their abilities and desired more confidence. As these counselors gained experience, they felt more confidence and freedom in acknowledging their limitations. A beginning counselor captured the insecurities of new counselors by saying, "I feel like I have to put up this, be as professional as I can be and you know talk as technically as I can about what I do and what I am doing" (A4). At the beginning stage of the counseling profession, there was recognition that confidence struggles were part of the process. Another beginning counselor said, "I almost think it is probably

a good place not to feel comfortable. . . . I definitely would like to feel really confident. It's all a process" (A5).

Whereas beginning counselors struggled to have confidence within their professional role, experienced counselors had gained confidence and felt freedom in recognizing their limitations. One experienced counselor stated,

Early on when I was scared, I was fearful and not confident . . . but for me now, I do think that it is probably, it's really awesome. . . . I still screw things up. I am just brave enough now to own up when I do. (B11)

With an increase in confidence and freedom, counselors also appreciated the community of counselors that they used for client referrals. Instead of feeling that they needed to know everything, they developed a network of people who supported their practice and their clients. This idea was described by an expert counselor:

I also am appreciative of a network of folks who have a wider range of skills in their specialties than I do and I feel much more comfortable in my own skin saying, hey could you work with this person. . . . I think there is a little bit more confidence I have in relinquishing and not thinking I have to have all the answers for everybody, every case. (C6)

Separation versus integration. In this theme, counselors actively separated and integrated both personal and professional aspects of their lives into their professional identities. When beginning counselors talked about their identity, they spoke of separating work from other areas of their life. Upon gaining experience, counselors developed a sense of their professional self and personal self integrating into one identity. As counselors talked about their definition of counseling and how they had imagined counseling to be, it was evident that change occurred over their professional life span. A beginning counselor reported how she compartmentalized her roles:

I am also a [sports team] coach so I am in an out-of-counselor role. I am not a counselor on the court. . . . You can't be both all the time. . . . I kind of turn it on, turn it off. (A2)

This counselor viewed counseling as something she could leave once she stepped out of her office to assume another role.

Counselors reported that they believed that this idea of separation was part of their training. One experienced counselor stated, "In school they teach you to leave it [work] and take care of yourself, but it is hard when you are in it. . . . It is hard to leave that office and go home" (B13).

Through more experience, counselors viewed the different facets of their job as part of a larger purpose for helping clients. An expert counselor said, "I think when I first started, it used to be really compartmentalized . . . then like you said,

jack-of-all-trades, you do whatever it takes to get that child, do whatever you have to do" (C3). There was a realization that clients are important, and there was a desire to give extra effort to best help them.

Expert counselors reached a level of congruency with their professional and personal selves. They were able to reflect and see how personal experiences affected them professionally and how professional experiences affected their personal life. One expert counselor shared,

I think the thing that has shaped my life as a counselor is probably my son's death . . . my own grieving journey just really brought everything out and I went back, I went head long into training for the grief and loss. (C5)

Experienced guide. Counselors at all levels expressed the importance of having a mentor, supervisor, peer supervision, or some form of experienced guide to help them in their professional development. Participants talked about the need to learn from an experienced counselor when discussing what they needed to progress to the next level of development of their professional identity, experiences that had contributed most to their professional identity, and experiences that had resonated most with them as a counselor.

A beginning counselor looked for "someone to say I experienced the same thing and this is what I did" (A3). Another beginning counselor spoke about the impact that a mentor had on her professional development: "I don't know where I would be had I not had that mentor which has probably been the most beneficial thing as far as my professional identity goes and learning about who I am professionally" (A1). Beginning counselors look to counselors with more experience to give them ideas, advice, and support.

Peer supervision is another type of supervision that counselors found beneficial. Within the relationship, counselors assumed roles of both supervisor and supervisee, and there was a recognition that counselors with varying years of experience brought strengths to the relationship. An experienced counselor talked about the power of peer supervision:

There are three other counselors, so we have a lot of time to talk about cases and support each other, so I think other professionals who have been in it longer than I have and new professionals that come in and have a new energy and a different idea about things. (B10)

The value in continuing a mentoring relationship was also reported by expert counselors. One expert counselor discussed the impact his mentor continues to have on him as a professional:

Watching him present, watching him work with families and demonstrations, having a chance to affiliate with him. That it continues to be kind of like, boy that's sort of who, that's the arena I'd like to be when I grow up. (C6)

Continuous learning. Each group of counselors recognized learning as a lifelong endeavor and discussed ways to acquire additional professional knowledge. Counselors were energized as they talked about what they needed to progress to the next level of development of their professional identity; they also spoke of learning from classes, conferences, and trainings.

Beginning counselors expressed excitement about the vast amount of information in the field. For example, one beginning counselor said, "I think that is exciting about our profession because we have to stay somewhat fluid and just keep on changing" (A1). Participants were comfortable with the idea that they would have to continue to learn to continue developing as a professional.

As counselors gained experience, their learning became more focused on their areas of expertise and interest. An experienced counselor said, "I study, study, study, study because I am always interested in what is working, and I am always searching out what's going to help [clients], and I use everything" (B12). Participants reported a desire to study specific topics that would best help their clients and the populations that they work with daily. An experienced counselor talked about wanting "training on specific things, bullying, ADHD [attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder], autism" (B2).

Although they had many years of counseling experience, expert counselors embraced the idea of continuous learning. An expert counselor talked about his comfort level with continuing to be a student at a conference:

They had all these labels and badges that you could attach to your name tag, "Presenter," or you know, "First Time Attendee," and I don't know whether it was what I wanted to be as far as my next level, or if it was the contrarian in me, but I picked up a "Student" badge and attached it to my name tag. And actually I began to feel very, very comfortable with that. There's this, there is more for me to learn. (C6)

Conversations about additional educational experiences energized counselors at all levels. For counselors, learning was a lifelong endeavor because the field is constantly evolving.

Work with clients. Clients provided the needed positive reinforcements for counselors to do their job. A beginning counselor stated, "I feel I am making a small difference and constantly getting those reinforcers and motivators" (A4). Clients made the counselors' learning, frustrations, and struggles worthwhile. Participants were able to point to specific success stories or instances of failure that had a lasting impact on them professionally. Across all levels and work settings, work with clients was most meaningful to counselors' professional identity development. Participants in every group discussed their work with clients when asked about the experiences that had contributed most to their professional identity, the experiences that had resonated most with them, and how they felt about themselves as counselors.

Beginning counselors were surprised at the strength people showed despite their circumstances. Instead of being the expert, counselors found themselves learning from their clients. One beginning counselor said, "I have been surprised, which I am ashamed to say, that I just discovered more about how people are strong and resilient . . . nothing seems to have gone well but they were just incredibly strong" (A7).

Experienced counselors were pleased when they saw clients grow and reach their counseling goals. Termination was viewed as a graduation from counseling and a time when both the client and counselor were proud of themselves. An experienced counselor shared,

I terminated [counseling] a young college girl whom I had been working with for about two and half years. . . . When we finally met for the last time last week, it was mixed feelings. I was almost sad because I was saying good-bye to her, but then I was very proud of her work, but then I was proud of myself because I stuck with her and saw her through. (B13)

Success stories involved clients in crisis and times when counselors were able to help. The counselors realized that they had made a difference in another person's life. For example, one experienced counselor stated, "It has been the children who have been sexually abused, or the children who have had physical abuse or witnessed you know things that were traumatic for them and I know that those children really, really need me" (B6).

Emergence of Theory

In analyzing the current data, we determined that the themes found in the participants' experiences were part of the transformational tasks associated with counselors' professional identity development. Counselors' professional identity was transformed in response to completing each task. The three tasks the practicing counselors worked to accomplish were idealism toward realism, burnout toward rejuvenation, and compartmentalization toward congruency (see Figure 1). These tasks served as a foundation to the process reported by the participants within the themes of adjustment to expectations, confidence and freedom, and separation versus integration. As counselors talked about each of these areas, they reported factors that prompted their movement. These factors were the catalysts for a changing identity. The same transformational process was used at each stage: work with clients, experienced guide, and continuous learning. In essence, the grounded theory of this study was based on the transformational tasks of professional identity development of counselors.

Beginning counselors' idealistic views were confronted with the reality of the work world. This transformational task involved the themes of adjustment to expectations and confidence/freedom. The task at this stage was for new counselors to reconcile their idealized visions with reality. Participants

reported entering the workforce unprepared, and new counselors often experienced disillusionment with their graduate training (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992). As counselors worked to accomplish the task, they experienced self-doubt and confidence struggles. Other studies found that new counselors lacked confidence and needed external validation (Auxier et al., 2003; Brott & Myers, 1999; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). Participants reported that external validation came from experienced guides and clients. As counselors received external validation from an experienced guide or a client and gained additional knowledge, they were able to accomplish this task. The challenge of this task was for counselors to become realistic about their abilities and their role.

Experienced counselors were challenged with the task of burnout toward rejuvenation, which also addressed the theme of adjustment to expectations. Participants reported feeling dissatisfied with their jobs after years of dealing with continual frustrations. As Gibson et al. (2010) found, counselors reported that the public had misperceptions about the counseling profession. Daily, counselors are advocates for the profession to educators and insurance companies, and these other entities influence counselors' role and affect their identity (Brott & Myers, 1999). Nevertheless, there was a sense that counselors came to terms with these frustrations and found a way to move forward professionally. The catalysts for this movement were continuous learning, work with clients, and an experienced guide. Counselors in this study were energized by continuing to learn. They reported that learning new techniques, taking classes, or making a change in their counseling approach rejuvenated their professional outlook. Successes with clients made the frustrations worthwhile. Knowing that they had made a difference or saved a life was the reinforcement counselors needed to continue to do their job. Participants also discussed how support from other counselors helped them move forward during stressful times.

The third transformational task challenged counselors to move from compartmentalizing counseling to having a congruent view of the self. This task included the themes separation versus integration as well as confidence and freedom. The movement from compartmentalization to congruency was a slow process fostered by experiences with others (clients, experienced guides, and learning opportunities). Through these interactions and personal experiences, counselors experienced a merging of their professional and personal selves into a congruent identity.

Participants reported viewing counseling as something separate from other aspects of their lives. They wanted to keep their professional and personal lives separate in order to have balance. However, congruency was observed in expert counselors. Skovholt and Rønnestad (1992) found an authenticity-to-self in experienced counselors in which role, working style, and personality complemented one another. Expert counselors in the current study accepted that being a counselor was a core part of who they were as a person. They were confident,

were able to find balance, and experienced the freedom to take professional risks. With the freedom to refer clients to other counselors came a recognition of the professional community. In contrast to Gazzola and Smith (2007) and Gibson et al. (2010), in the current study, counselors did not consider the professional community as comprising only counselors. Instead, they seemed to include other helping professionals in the professional community, such as psychologists, social workers, and educators. This suggests a broader view of the professional community as counselors looked beyond the counseling profession for support and information.

The expert counselors were aware of their limitations and experienced freedom in knowing their limitations. Their personal and professional selves had merged to create a congruent self in which life experiences and professional experiences were valued. Friedman and Kaslow (1986) found that counselors became authentic and congruent as their professional and personal selves merged. Participants in the current study understood the value of their life experiences, including their religious beliefs, values, interests, and personal losses such as divorce or death in shaping who they were as a professional.

Discussion

The themes reported in this study were found to be important to counselors' professional identity development. They provided information about the process of identity development over the course of the professional life span. The findings are consistent with previous studies, which have found that students developed an idealistic view of counseling during training (Cave & Clandinin, 2007; Nyström, Dahlgren, & Dahlgren, 2008; Swennen, Volman, & van Essen, 2008; Troman, 2008) and that counselors entered the workforce with unrealistic expectations (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Participants in the current study discussed how their preconceived view of counseling was challenged by the realities of the workplace environment. Also, counselors with 1–2 years of experience reported confidence struggles and feelings of self-doubt that are consistent with previous studies (Bischoff et al., 2002; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992; Woodside et al., 2007). It was observed that confidence grew as counselors gained experience. This is consistent with previous studies that found counselors gained confidence through experience, successes, and earning respect from others (Magnuson, Black, & Lahman, 2006; Magnuson, Shaw, Tubin, & Norem, 2004; R. G. Smith, 2007; Swennen et al., 2008). As counselors gained confidence, they reported realizing that they could handle their job, experiencing freedom to make mistakes, and understanding their limitations.

In addition, the data support how counselors become congruent as their professional and personal selves merge (Friedman & Kaslow, 1986). Three of the themes—work with clients, experienced guide, and continuous learning—proved to be change agents as counselors developed. Clients provided

positive reinforcements for counselors to do their job, and successes and failures shaped the counselors' identity. Findings support previous studies that found that successes and failures with clients had a profound impact on counselors' identity (Bischoff et al., 2002; Brott & Myers, 1999). When counselors realized that they helped someone, they were empowered; this led to more confidence and energy. Previous studies found that work with clients validated new professionals (Bischoff et al., 2002; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Studer, 2007). Also, previous studies have found that supervision was helpful in developing a strong identity as a counselor (Bischoff et al., 2002; Brott & Myers, 1999). Other studies (Cave & Clandinin, 2007; Dollarhide & Miller, 2006; Magnuson, 2002; Magnuson et al., 2006) found supervisors to be important to new counselors as they adjusted to the counseling profession. Positive feedback helped validate them as professionals (Cave & Clandinin, 2007). The current data support these findings in addition to suggesting that supervision affected counselors at all experience levels. Each group admitted that they needed help moving forward, which is consistent with Gibson et al.'s (2010) findings. Previous research indicated that new counselors wanted to fill in knowledge gaps and that they had the desire and excitement to learn (Nyström et al., 2008; R. G. Smith, 2007).

Limitations and Implications

The results of this study may not be applicable to all counselors because of the limited number of participants found within focus groups. The study investigated the experiences of 26 participants in the southeastern United States. Cultural limitations may exist (McGowen & Hart, 1990; K. L. Smith, 2007) because most of the participants in our study were White women and were not representative of all counselors. Also, the use of focus groups to collect data limited the amount of in-depth exploration individual interviews may have provided. If participants had sensitive or threatening input, they may have been hesitant to share their perspective with their peers in a group setting. However, the author who conducted the interviews made efforts to create a welcoming and open environment in which participants felt comfortable sharing their experience. Future studies can strive to have a more representative sample of the counseling population from various geographic areas. Additionally, the use of individual interviews may elicit more in-depth information from interview content and observation. Furthermore, longitudinal research is warranted because of the transformational tasks and processes that occur within each task at each nodal point. Future research in professional identity development needs to consider the years of experience not captured in the current study. The results of this study have implications for counselors-in-training, counselor educators, counselors, supervisors, professional organizations, and future research.

First, counselor educators have the responsibility to foster and develop the professional identity of counselors-in-training (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2009). Counselor educators can use the information about transformational tasks and how to accomplish the tasks to better prepare emerging counselors. When counselors-in-training enter programs, they can be given assignments such as interviewing or shadowing practicing counselors to gain a more realistic perspective of the workforce. Also, counselor educators can give practical perspectives by inviting guest speakers who are practicing counselors into all classes. Counselor educators who are also practitioners can use examples in their teaching from their current practice to illustrate a reasonable view of counseling. In addition, counselor educators can strive to ensure that practicum and internship experiences are realistic and are best preparing counselors-in-training for the realities of the work environment. Therefore, counselors entering the workplace will have more reasonable expectations of the counseling profession. They can also know what to expect as they grow and develop within the profession. Realistic expectations can lead to less frustration, which would help both counselors and clients.

Second, this study provides counselors with a process of their professional identity development. Recognition of the transformational tasks can normalize the counselor experience. There can be comfort in knowing that others are facing the same issues and frustrations. Knowledge that counselors at each stage face a similar struggle can lead to greater peer support. As counselors feel self-doubt, burn-out, or incongruence, they will know the tools (continuous learning, work with clients, and experienced guide) to help them work through their struggles.

Finally, the results of this study reinforce the benefits of supervision at all levels of counseling. Counselors should be encouraged to seek out an experienced guide to help them navigate their professional growth. Also, supervisors can use the knowledge about the struggles at each stage of development to better support their supervisees. Supervisors can use the information about the need for continuous learning to help their supervisees by providing additional learning opportunities. Supervisors can tailor their trainings to the developmental needs of their supervisees.

Conclusion

Results of this study indicated that six themes were important to counselors' identity development: adjustment to expectations, confidence and freedom, separation versus integration, experienced guide, continuous learning, and work with clients. In addition, a process emerged that included transformational tasks at each professional life stage. This study highlights the process of counselors' professional identity development and how it changes during the professional life

span. Identity development is a lifelong process. As counselors gain awareness of this process, they can be more effective and experience greater job satisfaction.

References

- Auxier, C. R., Hughes, F. R., & Kline, W. B. (2003). Identity development in counselors-in-training. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 43*, 25–38.
- Bischoff, R. J., Barton, M., Thober, J., & Hawley, R. (2002). Events and experiences impacting the development of clinical self confidence: A study of the first year of client contact. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 28*, 371–382.
- Borders, L. D., & Usher, C. H. (1992). Post-degree supervision: Existing and preferred practices. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 70*, 594–599.
- Brott, P. E. (2006). Counselor education accountability: Training the effective professional school counselor. *Professional School Counseling, 10*, 179–188.
- Brott, P. E., & Myers, J. E. (1999). Development of professional school counseling identity: A grounded theory. *Professional School Counseling, 2*, 339–348.
- Cave, M. T., & Clandinin, D. J. (2007). Learning to live with being a physician. *Reflective Practice, 8*, 75–91.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (2009). *2009 standards*. Retrieved from <http://www.cacrep.org/doc/2009%20Standards.pdf>
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dobrow, S. R., & Higgins, M. C. (2005). Developmental networks and professional identity: A longitudinal study. *Career Development International, 10*, 567–583. doi:10.1108/13620430510620629
- Dollarhide, C. T., Gibson, D. M., & Moss, J. M. (2013). Professional identity development of counselor education doctoral students. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 52*, 137–150.
- Dollarhide, C. T., & Miller, G. M. (2006). Supervision for preparation and practice of school counselors: Pathways to excellence. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 45*, 242–252.
- Friedman, D., & Kaslow, N. J. (1986). The development of professional identity in psychotherapists: Six stages in the supervision process. In F. Kaslow (Ed.), *Supervision and training: Models, dilemmas, and challenges* (pp. 29–49). London, England: Haworth Press.
- Gazzola, N., & Smith, J. D. (2007). Who do we think we are? A survey of counselors in Canada. *International Journal of Advanced Counselling, 29*, 97–110.
- Gibson, D. M., Dollarhide, C. T., & Moss, J. M. (2010). Professional identity development: A grounded theory of transformational tasks of new counselors. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 50*, 21–37.
- Hays, D. G., & Singh, A. A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

- Heppner, P. P., & Heppner, M. J. (2004). *Writing and publishing your thesis, dissertation, and research: A guide for students in the helping professions*. Belmont, CA: Thompson Brooks/Cole.
- Howard, E. E., Inman, A. G., & Altman, A. N. (2006). Critical incidents among novice counselor trainees. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 46*, 88–102.
- Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Magnuson, S. (2002). New assistant professors of counselor education: Their 1st year. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 41*, 306–320.
- Magnuson, S., Black, L. L., & Lahman, M. K. E. (2006). The 2000 cohort of new assistant professors of counselor education: Year 3. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 45*, 162–179.
- Magnuson, S., Shaw, H., Tubin, B., & Norem, K. (2004). Assistant professors of counselor education: First and second year experiences. *Journal of Professional Counseling: Practice, Theory, and Research, 32*, 3–18.
- McGowen, K. R., & Hart, L. E. (1990). Still different after all these years: Gender differences in professional identity formations. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 21*, 118–123.
- Mellin, E. A., Hunt, B., & Nichols, L. M. (2011). Counselor professional identity: Findings and implications for counseling and interprofessional collaboration. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 89*, 140–147.
- Monrouxe, L. V. (2009). Negotiating professional identities: Dominant and contesting narratives in medical students' longitudinal audio diaries. *Current Narratives, 1*, 41–59.
- Nelson, K. W., & Jackson, S. A. (2003). Professional counselor identity development: A qualitative study of Hispanic student interns. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 43*, 2–14.
- Nyström, S., Dahlgren, M. A., & Dahlgren, L. O. (2008). A winding road: Professional trajectories from higher education to working life—A case study of political science and psychology graduates. *Studies in Continuing Education, 30*, 215–229.
- Rønnestad, M. H., & Skovholt, T. M. (2003). The journey of the counselor and therapist: Research findings and perspectives on professional development. *Journal of Career Development, 30*, 5–44.
- Skovholt, T. M., & Rønnestad, M. H. (1992). Themes in therapist and counselor development. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 70*, 505–515.
- Skovholt, T. M., & Rønnestad, M. H. (2003). Struggles of the novice counselor and therapist. *Journal of Career Development, 30*, 45–58.
- Smith, K. L. (2007). *The experiences of Deaf counselors in developing their professional identity* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3255229)
- Smith, R. G. (2007). Developing professional identities and knowledge: Becoming primary teachers. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice, 13*, 377–397.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Studer, J. (2007). Erik Erikson's psychosocial stages applied to supervision. *Guidance and Counseling, 21*, 168–173.
- Swennen, A., Volman, M., & van Essen, M. (2008). The development of the professional identity of two teacher educators in the context of Dutch teacher education. *European Journal of Teacher Education, 31*, 169–184.
- Troman, G. (2008). Primary teacher identity, commitment and career in performative school cultures. *British Educational Research Journal, 34*, 619–633.
- Woodside, M., Oberman, A. H., Cole, K. G., & Carruth, E. K. (2007). Learning to be a counselor: A prepracticum point of view. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 47*, 14–28.