Identity Development in Counselors-in-Training

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Researchers used 2 rounds of individual interviews and a focus group meeting to explore the identity development experiences of master's-degree counselor education students. Grounded theory procedures generated a tentative substantive theory that conceptualized these experiences. The theory illustrated how counselors-in-training used a recycling identity formation process that involved conceptual and experiential learning experiences to identify, clarify, and reclarify their identities as counselors.

Counselors develop professional identities that serve as frames of reference for their counseling roles and decisions (Brott & Myers, 1999). Professional identities form as counselors develop attitudes about responsibilities, ethical standards, membership within the profession, and learning styles that support higher levels of cognitive functioning (Blocher, 1983; Etringer, Hillerbrand, & Claiborn, 1995; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; VanZandt, 1990). Counselors' identities differ from identities formed in many other professions because, in addition to forming attitudes about their professional selves, counselors develop a "therapeutic self that consists of a unique personal blend of the developed professional and personal selves" (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, p. 507). Counselors' personal selves include "values and theoretical stance" (Skovholt & Ronnestad, p. 507), "emotional awareness," and "autonomy" (Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982, p. 21).

Counselors use an individuation process to develop their counseling identities (Bruss & Kopala, 1993; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). This process begins when students with "a long history of being under the influence of . . . authority figures" (Loganbill et al., 1982, p. 21) and a dependency "on training providers to assist in clarifying [their] role . . . and to assist in shaping [their] self-concept[s]" (Bruss & Kopala, p. 687) initiate their counseling programs. Eventually, these students develop a "solid nonthreatened belief in [their] own autonomy, yet [are] equally nonthreatened by [their] own occasional yet appropriate dependency" (Loganbill et al., p. 22). The autonomy and dependency aspects of this individuation process

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cycle between dissonance and empowerment (Sawatzky, Jevne, & Clark, 1994). After graduation, this process continues to recycle during counselors’ careers as “movement from reliance on external authority to reliance on internal authority” (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, p. 514).

Research, however, has not detailed how master’s-level counseling students use an individuation process to develop counseling identities during their program of study. Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) depicted counselors-in-training as relying heavily on experts at the beginning of their training, but they did not describe this period in depth. Although Sawatzky et al. (1994) concluded that doctoral counseling students move from dependence to autonomy, they did not address the experiences of master’s-level students. Brott and Myers (1999) found that school counselors developed professional identities after graduation, but they did not describe students’ experiences during their programs. The research consistently indicates that counselors develop a counseling identity and that the development of counselors’ professional and personal identities begins during training (Brott & Myers, 1999; Loganbill et al., 1982; Sawatzky et al., 1994; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

In addition to research, supervision theorists have extended the concepts of cognitive development theory to create stage models of counselor identity development (Blocher, 1983; Loganbill et al., 1982; Stoltenberg, 1981). Borders (1989) and Holloway (1987) challenged the value of these models and argued that theorists should ground counselor development theories in the actual developmental experiences of counselors: “There is a need for descriptions of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of supervisees at various developmental stages” (Borders, 1989, p. 17).

A deeper understanding of the identity development of master’s-level counselor education students can help counselor educators provide education and supervision that are more sensitive to students’ developmental experiences. Counselor educators can, therefore, provide experiences that facilitate students’ identity development. Consequently, the purpose of this research was to develop a provisional theory of counselor identity development that is grounded in the experiences of master’s-level counselor education students.

Method and Procedure

Approach

We (two doctoral students and a counselor education faculty member) used a grounded theory approach to develop a tentative theory of counselor identity development. Along with ethnography and phenomenology, grounded theory is one of the three most widely used qualitative approaches (Stern, 1994). Grounded theory, as originally presented (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and developed by Glaser (1992),
operates from a postpositivist perspective. Postpositivism acknowledges that there is a need for research to articulate the perspectives of participants and that research findings can only approximate "reality" or "truth" (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). However, postpositivism also emphasizes the "assumptions of an objective, external reality, a neutral observer who discovers data, reductionist inquiry of manageable research problems, and objectivist rendering of data" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510).

More recently, Strauss and Corbin (1998) developed a second branch of grounded theory that acknowledges the postmodern assumptions that research findings are time and context bound. The incorporation of these ideas allowed Strauss and Corbin to de-emphasize the need for reproducibility and the importance of generalizing theory beyond the setting and the persons studied (Charmaz, 2000). "The real merit of a substantive theory lies in its ability to speak specifically for the populations from which it was derived and apply back to them" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 267).

Also recently, researchers developed a third branch of grounded theory that espouses the relativistic perspectives of constructivism (Annells, 1996; Charmaz, 2000). The constructivist assumptions that guide this grounded theory approach include the following: (a) Realities are socially developed, locally determined, and based on participants' experiences; (b) researchers and participants are subjectively and interactively linked; (c) the interaction between researchers and participants creates meaning for the phenomenon being explored; and (d) understanding evolves from ongoing interaction between researchers and participants (Annells, 1996; Charmaz, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1998). Our study used a constructivist grounded theory approach.

**Sampling Procedure, Setting, and Sample**

Typical case sampling—a form of purposive sampling—to select participants (Patton, 2002) was used in this study. Typical case sampling procedures involved selecting participants who were most likely to offer thoughtful, information-rich responses to interview questions and who were representative of the setting being studied (Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 2002).

We selected 8 full-time master's-degree students who were enrolled during the fall semester of the 2nd year of their 2-year counselor education programs in universities located in the northwestern United States; the programs were accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. Participants included 4 women (ages 24, 25, 30, and 31 years) and 4 men (ages 28, 32, 38, and 54 years). All participants were European American and reflected the highly homogenous ethnic and racial characteristics of this student population. Six participants
majored in mental health counseling, 1 majored in school counseling, and 1 majored in student affairs. All participants were completing internships in settings appropriate to their major and were receiving individual on-site supervision, group supervision, and weekly individual supervision by doctoral students.

Data Collection and Analysis Process

Two rounds of individual interviews and a focus group were used to generate data for analysis and to ensure that the emerging theory was grounded in the experiences of the participants. The transcripts of recordings of the interviews and focus group were edited for accuracy. The first two rounds of interviews were in-depth individual interviews. A focus group composed of all participants constituted a third-round interview. Initial interview questions were based on several themes in counselor development literature and on our observations of counselors-in-training: Counselors experience a developmental process that interacts with their self-concepts; counselors develop a counselor identity during this process; and this process involves experiential, emotional, and cognitive elements. The initial questions were (a) What experiences have been most important to you in your development as a counselor? (b) How are your personal characteristics influencing how you are developing as a counselor? (c) How does seeing yourself as a counselor affect how you see yourself as a person?

Analysis of the data generated from the initial interviews included open and axial coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Essentially, open coding involved grouping data thematically and developing concepts that represented those themes; axial coding involved ensuring that the concepts accounted for all the data and developing connections between the concepts (Flick, 2002). We continuously asked questions about the meaning of the data and emerging concepts and continuously made comparisons to differentiate data and concepts throughout the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

After open and axial coding procedures had been completed, second-round interview questions were developed to address concepts that had been less clearly described, uncertain connections between concepts, and aspects of the participants’ experiences that needed more complete description. The following questions theoretically sampled (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) these areas of concern: (a) What has been the role of course work and readings in your learning to be a counselor? (b) What do you do to make sense of the input you receive from supervisors, peers, clients, or supervision group members when it does not fit with how you see yourself? What about when the input fits with how you see yourself? (c) Describe your attitudes toward your learning experiences in the program and how those attitudes may have changed during your time in the
program. How have your experiences as a counselor, group member, or supervisee influenced your becoming a counselor?

Analysis of second-round individual interviews involved axial coding along with the use of selective coding, coding for process, and a conditional matrix (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Essentially, selective coding involved identifying the concept that served as a context or the core theme that organized the other concepts. Coding for process involved looking at the concepts and defining how they influenced or interacted with each other over time. Finally, a conditional matrix was used to understand the conditions and consequences of the emerging concepts (Flick, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These analytic procedures confirmed and deepened descriptions of initial concepts and illuminated the areas explored by the second-round interview questions. Examples of confirmed and deepened concepts included descriptions of how participants perceived their experiences of learning counseling skills, participating in group and individual supervision, and being group members during the program's required group experience. Data also described how participants' perceptions and learning processes evolved as they became counselors. At the same time, data analysis modified the definitions and relationships of several initial concepts and clarified the processes that participants experienced as they developed as counselors. For example, analysis more clearly depicted how participants managed the information and feedback provided by peers and supervisors and the reactions of clients when this information fit or did not fit with participants' own perceptions. Data also showed how students' perceptions changed as they developed as counselors regarding how to use course work and readings in their practice as counselors.

Because second-round interview data largely clarified and supported the concepts and processes derived from initial analysis and because ample data were available for the derived concepts, we decided to conduct a focus group interview with all of the study's participants. The purpose of the focus group was to continue conversation with participants in order to develop a shared understanding of their identity development experiences.

During the focus group, the researchers used a diagram (see Figure 1) to illustrate and guide discussion of the emerging theory. Participants were encouraged to discuss their perceptions of how consistent the concepts and processes presented in the theory were with their experiences as developing counselors. Participants supported the theoretical concepts and the relationships between the concepts; they also described experiences that were extremely consistent with the theory. In addition, participants enthusiastically supported the cyclic processes that emerged during second-round data analysis. Participants used the theory as a framework for describing how their experiences reflected the flow of the theory.
As mentioned earlier in this article, we were two doctoral students and a counselor education faculty member. Both doctoral students were in the 2nd year of their full-time doctoral program, had completed two supervision courses, and were experienced supervisors. During the course of this study, the first and second authors also participated as supervisors in participants’ group supervision meetings. The doctoral student researchers conducted the individual interviews and focus group and observed participants during group supervision. The faculty member had more than 20 years of counselor education and supervision experience and had no contact with the participants during the course of the study.

We shared several assumptions regarding the development of counseling students. These assumptions developed from our reading of the counselor identity development literature, our experiences as developing counselors, and our observations of counseling students. These assumptions included the following: (a) Counseling students experience a personal and professional maturation process as they progress through their training programs, (b) counseling students seem to respond differently to supervision as they acquire more knowledge and skills, (c) counseling students develop a more personal style of counseling as they near graduation, and (d) personal experiences (participation in the required group
experience and skill development experiences) and professional experiences (internships and practicums) seem to have a profound impact on counseling students. At the beginning of the study and during data analysis, we attempted to bracket our assumptions by identifying and discussing how these assumptions could interfere with analysis.

We used triangulation procedures to increase the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation procedures included prolonged engagement, multiple research methods, multiple researchers, member checks, and literature triangulation. Prolonged engagement included observation and interaction with the participants before and during the entire study, intensive interaction in two in-depth individual interviews, and a 1-hour focus group meeting. Multiple research methods included individual interviews, a focus group meeting, and observation of the participants in their group supervision labs. In analyzing the data and building the theory, we used our different perspectives to enrich the interpretations of the data and to assist in the construction of the emerging theory. Member checks involved presenting the emerging theory to a focus group of the study’s participants and exploring how well the developed theory matched their experiences. Literature triangulation involved comparing and contrasting the developed theory with literature that describes counselor identity development.

Limitations

The theoretical statements that emerged from the first and second authors’ interactions with participants are consistent with the intentions of a constructivist grounded theory study. The theoretical statements and processes presented here are “conditional statements [that] do not approach some level of generalizable truth. Rather, they constitute a set of hypotheses and concepts that other researchers can transport to similar research problems and to other substantive fields” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 524). Readers need to decide, based on their understanding of the concepts and processes presented in this theory and on the descriptions of the participants and setting, whether this theory, or a part of the theory, is applicable in their setting.

From positivist and postpositivist perspectives, the theory generated in this study is quite limited in terms of its generalizability. Factors that might seem to be crucial from those perspectives are that we obtained data from a homogeneous sample in a single setting and that the population studied was not large enough to ensure any degree of “truth value.” These factors, however, are not relevant to the approach, methodology, or philosophical premises that guided this investigation.
A recycling identity formation process emerged from data analysis. The recycling identity formation process included three constituent processes: conceptual learning, experiential learning, and external evaluation. Each of these constituent processes interacted with the other, and together they described the recycling identity formation process. The recycling identity formation process depicts the meaning that participants gave to their experiences as developing counselors, how participants assimilated these experiences, the context within which participants acted, and how the constituent processes occurred over time.

When participants began their counseling program, they expected traditional academic experiences such as listening to lectures, reading, and submitting papers. These traditional academic experiences were viewed as conceptual learning. Participants, especially during the initial phases of their program, generally considered conceptual learning to be useful. For example, some participants commented, "to study is the only way that you can basically understand the theories that are out there" and "I think that course work kind of made me hungry to get more information." As participants developed as counselors, they continued to value conceptual learning experiences, but the extent to which they valued this form of learning diminished.

Over time, experiential learning—learning that occurred during participants' involvement in counseling techniques classes, practicums, internships, and small group experiences—became progressively more important: "I mean, I could spout off theories all day long, but actually having to apply it, that's a whole other thing and that's what you need to be able to do." Initially, however, participants struggled as they made the transition from conceptual learning to experiential learning and were anxious when they became involved in experiential learning. This transition involved the participants in addressing their emotional reactions to learning, which required them to develop new emotional and behavioral awareness, change interpersonal behaviors, and develop skills based on feedback about their counseling behaviors. Participants commented, "While I was going through them [experiences], it seemed to be a very—almost devastating—consuming kind of an experience" and "So, I was going through a lot of confusion at that time and questioning, and [my] self-confidence was very, very fluctuating."

Integrally connected to experiential learning was external evaluation. During external evaluation, participants received information and feedback from peers, supervisors, professors, and clients about their personal and counseling behaviors. Participants' comments
indicated that they perceived the information and feedback about their behaviors as evaluative and indicated that they experienced ongoing anxiety about these continuing evaluations. The anxiety generated by external evaluation initially emerged when participants began learning basic counseling skills; continued as they received feedback regarding their interpersonal behaviors during their small group experience; and persisted, to some extent, in individual and group supervision sessions throughout their program. External evaluation constantly challenged participants' self-concepts. "And as it [group] went on, it was exciting, but of course [it was an] emotional roller coaster of learning more about myself and dealing with personal garbage . . . it was more fear-producing. . . . It was uncomfortable." Over time, participants' reactions to external evaluation moderated according to their perceptions of the external evaluations they received. Participants' assessments of the external evaluation they received depended on whether they perceived the evaluations as validation or disconfirmation of their views of themselves as counselors and persons.

When participants perceived external evaluation as validation of their impressions of themselves as counselors and persons, their anxiety diminished. Simultaneously, however, they also reacted in several other ways. Sometimes, they accepted validation as affirming: "It makes me pretty happy. I feel like, 'Hey, I'm on the right track' and this . . . is very refreshing and very rewarding to feel like it is coming together." "Well, I see it as a victory, as kind of a positive stroke. Again validating, I can look at it and say, 'Ok, yeah, this is what I thought too, this is what I hoped for.'" At other times, participants discounted validation because they perceived it as insincere: "And sometimes it feels like the positives are said but not meant." "Don't give me the positive feedback when, you know, it just doesn't feel real." On other occasions, participants evaluated the validation before deciding to accept or discount it: "I usually think about it some more on my own. I try to get feedback from outside, but also keep processing on my own." "Now I might ask, 'Does that really reflect who I am or what I want?' I do choose to look at it more critically." Participants did not indicate that they accepted validation without evaluating its value or the motivations of the person offering the validation in any circumstance.

When participants perceived the external evaluation as disconfirmation of their impressions of themselves as counselors and persons, they began a complex process. They began by reflecting on the external evaluation, retaining awareness of the evaluation, and verifying the disconfirmation before making a decision about the usefulness or relevance of the external evaluation to their learning.
Reflecting was the process participants used to compare the evaluations of supervisors and peers against their self-perceptions. During this comparison process, participants actively questioned their self-perceptions and carefully examined others' evaluations before deciding to accept or disregard the evaluations: "I want to know if I am distorting it first off, and then I want to know if they're distorting what they're saying. And then I'll look at, 'am I distorting so that they are getting a distorted picture.'" "I've gotten feedback saying, 'Well, you're not as present in your session as you need to be.' And so that's where it's disconfirming. And so I've had to sit back and reflect and say, 'Ok, am I really not being present, or is that just his perception.'"

Occasionally, participants deferred making a decision on how to react to disconfirmations by retaining awareness of the evaluation while they accumulated additional information. On these occasions, participants looked for further evidence before changing their impressions of themselves. For example, one participant said, "I just put it in this unknown box of mine. I see myself as this way, my supervisor is seeing me as this way; I just leave it as this unknown... but still keep it in the back of my mind, and watch for it."

Participants' most common reaction to disconfirmation was to initiate a verification process, which included experimenting, consulting, or clarifying. Some participants decided to test disconfirmations by experimenting: "Well, usually I will give it a couple shots, because anytime you try something new it's pretty uncomfortable. So, I will try a different way, a different client, different location or something, and then try to make it work." Other participants looked for verification by consulting with peers or other supervisors. These participants valued additional opinions regarding disconfirmations. "I always like to consult... if other people can give a different way to look at things, and challenge me, then I will be the better person for it." Other participants used clarifying by returning to the source of the disconfirmation: "I would at the next session say, 'You know, you said something last week, and I'm still a little confused on this'" and "Well, the first part is understanding what they are saying, making sure I'm getting what they are saying."

Participants believed it was necessary to make decisions regarding disconfirmations. Their decision process included accepting or rejecting the usefulness or relevance of the disconfirming external evaluations. Participants who chose to reject disconfirmations after an initial consideration maintained their personal impressions of themselves as counselors and persons. These disconfirmations were rejected quickly because of the content of the evaluation, the clarity of the evaluation, or the source of the
evaluation. Some participants commented, “And if I can’t make sense out of it, I usually dismiss it.” “Well, I say to myself, That person is viewing me and my actions from their perspective, their experiences, and they can’t possibly know me better than I know myself.” “Some things I just choose to reject . . . I guess things that don’t seem to fit, I say, ‘that may be their stuff, they may need to express that. I don’t have to accept it.’”

Participants continually received and processed external evaluations throughout their experiences as counselors-in-training (experiential learning). They formed attitudes and behaviors through learning experiences and then received evaluations of those attitudes and behaviors from professors, supervisors, and peers. After processing evaluations, they looked for additional learning experiences to help them modify their attitudes and behaviors. Their evolution as counselors involved an increasingly autonomous and personally directed learning process, which involved a cycle of making external evaluations and returning to further conceptual learning. Participants’ goals for conceptual learning were to develop a theoretical understanding of their experiences. The process of experiencing confusing external evaluations or interactions with clients and then returning to conceptual learning was activated by experiences the participants did not understand: “Then I would come up against an experience that I didn’t understand and [would] have to go back to the conceptual to try and understand it.” “When I get challenged with something that I didn’t agree with or that’s disconfirming to me, part of the process is going back to the conceptual and the reading and the classes to see ‘Ok, this is what people are telling me is part of this theory.’”

The cyclical processes of conceptual and experiential learning helped participants form a progressively clearer personal counseling identity. Participants identified, clarified, and reclarified their self-concepts as counselors through their learning experiences as counselors-in-training. Simultaneously, participants experienced an evolution in their attitudes toward learning. They were excited and optimistic when entering the counseling program: “At the very beginning, I was very excited, very enthusiastic to get going, and to learn, and to be able to change myself in both the sense of career and in my personal life.” “Initially, I can remember being really excited. I mean, like when we sat in the first practicum [techniques] class, even theories class, it was kind of exciting.” Eventually, participants’ excitement turned to anxiety and doubt as they received external evaluations of their counseling skills, knowledge, and behaviors: “The attitude was really good going in, and then, as I got into it, I was questioning myself and questioning everything about what I did and how I did it.”
When we start getting into counseling techniques and the group experience, we're kind of broken down, and we're getting all this disconfirming information that we didn't know about ourselves, and everybody in the group is giving it to you: your supervisors, the docs [supervising doctoral participants], your classmates. And so, you're constantly reevaluating yourself and you feel like you're at the bottom of the barrel.

The disorientation participants felt as they encountered experiential learning eventually subsided as they began to cycle experiential and conceptual learning. As they identified, clarified, and reclarified definitions of themselves as counselors, the participants' attitudes toward the learning process usually changed from apprehension to realistic self-confidence: "Going from this real hopeful, this real positive, optimistic [side], to this down and just pessimistic side, and then, to me, the next step is almost to this realistic [side]."

And then we're built back to individuals again, and we start believing in ourselves and being able to take some of that information and knowing who we are and who we are as counselors . . . and then taking some in and saying, "Ok, yeah that is part of me, and I still need to work on that."

As participants gained confidence in their identities as counselors, they changed their attitudes toward themselves and their learning experiences: "I guess that was the biggest thing that changed so that I was more open to hear what needs to change and what doesn't need to change. And, uh, more willing to accept that." Another participant commented, "Certainly, my attitudes . . . of my abilities, of my interactions, my ability to interact, my ability to contribute—those have certainly changed. I think it [the master's program] is a tool that I'm using to [make] an emotional [connection] with other people and with a profession." According to the third participant,

I think the thing that really stands out in that whole process to me now is that when any person comes in for counseling or group that you do peel away the layers and you peel away, and you peel away, and you have to before they can rebuild the new place where they can live and be happy. And so you gain a better appreciation because you went through it and you understand that, but you also understand that's what has to happen before they can actually start to be where they need to be.

**Discussion**

Ideally, this research will initiate discussion and stimulate further research. The concepts presented describe processes that the counselors-in-training in this study experienced as they were learning to become counselors. The findings of the current research add detail to developmental stage models that suggest that counselor identity development is a growth process wherein counselors-in-training cycle through experiences and eventually assume a counse-
lor self-identity (Loganbill et al., 1982; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Stoltenberg, 1981). The current study describes how the participating counselors-in-training questioned their self-concepts as developing counselors and as persons in all their relationships. Throughout this personally consuming questioning process, they struggled to define and clarify their interpersonal and counseling identity.

Counselor educators who see this preliminary theory as relevant for their settings can experiment with the application of the theory's concepts. For example, supervisors' feedback might have greater impact if it is presented in the form of a conversation that involves the facilitation of supervisees' evaluation of the feedback and its relevance for them and their clients. Supervisees who are near the end of their programs become more autonomous, depending much less on the input of their supervisors. Supervisors who consider this during supervision sessions might change some aspects of their supervision approach.

Further research using similar procedures in other settings is needed. Informed dialogue about the learning processes that are integral to the identity development of counselors and the significance of this process for counselor education can only occur when there is a substantial amount of published exploratory research in this area.

References


