A Grounded Theory Study of Practicing Counselors’ Professional Identity Development

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Professional identity is shaped by individuals’ experiences within their role. Previous studies have investigated the process of professional identity formation and development in counselors-in-training (Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006; Woodside, Oberman, Cole, & Carruth, 2007) and suggest experiential learning, supervision, and reflection are important to the development of professional identity in emerging counselors. Gibson, Dollarhide, and Moss (2010) describe a move from external validation to self-validation through three developmental tasks: definition of counseling, responsibility for professional growth, and the transformation to systemic identity.

However, there is limited research on practicing counselors’ identity development. Supervision (Borders & Usher, 1992; Friedman & Kaslow, 1986), membership in professional organizations, and licensure have been found to contribute to professional identity development (LaFleur, 2002). The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory study was to investigate practicing counselors’ professional identity development at various points during their career lifespan. Similarities and differences between years of experience and counselors’ setting were analyzed and the catalysts for the changing identity were investigated.

School and community based counselors with 1-2, 5-15, and 20+ years of experience were invited to participate. Stratified purposeful sampling illustrated the subgroups and allowed for comparison between the groups being studied (Creswell, 2007). Through the use of 6 focus groups 26 participants shared their lived experiences as counselors. Focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and coded. From the data six themes emerged: adjustment to expectations, confidence and freedom, separation and integration, experienced guide, work with clients, and continuous learning. Within three of the themes (adjustment to expectations, confidence and freedom, separation and integration) there was movement as counselors gained experience working. Other themes (experienced guide, work with clients, and continuous learning) were catalysts for the movement that took place. There were not any major differences found between school counselors and community based counselors’ professional identity development.

The data suggested a process that includes transformational tasks at each point during the professional life span. Beginning counselors work through the issue of idealism towards realism. Participants in this study discussed how their preconceived view of counseling was challenged by the realities of the workplace environment. Experienced counselors face the issue of burnout towards rejuvenation. Participants reported feeling dissatisfied with their jobs after years of dealing with continuous frustrations. Counselors reported that non-counseling duties such as scheduling, testing, hall duty, negotiating with insurance companies, and collecting payments interfered with their
ability to best help their clients. Expert counselors work through compartmentalization towards congruency. Expert participants in the study accepted that being a counselor was a core part of who they were as a person. They were confident, able to find balance, and experienced the freedom to take professional risks. Each of the transformational tasks was accomplished through the process of continuous learning, working with an experienced guide, and work with clients.

Results from this study provide more information about the overall process of counselors' professional identity and normalize the struggles counselors' face. Further research is needed relating to school counselors' level of practice and research regarding other specialty areas of the counseling profession.

References

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