ACA Practice Briefs

Counselor Identity

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DESCRIPTION OF COUNSELOR IDENTITY

The field of counseling originated in the early 20th century with the establishment of the National Vocational Guidance Association (NVGA) in 1913, the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) in 1924, the Student Personnel Association for Teacher Education (SPATE) in 1931, and the National Association of Guidance and Counselor Trainers (NAGCT) in 1940 (Leong, 2008). These four organizations came together to form the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA) in 1952, which later became the current-day American Counseling Association (ACA). The cornerstones of the counseling profession were derived from the four founding organizations' identities and philosophies, which include an emphasis on research-based practice, lifespan development, career development, and social justice.

In 2009, the American Counseling Association published a statement of principles entitled *20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling* that emphasized the need for common professional identity among counselors. This "vision" also led to the *20/20 Principles for Unifying and Strenthening the Profession* that delineates a core set of principles that can be used to unify and advance the counseling profession. The 20/20 working group of 31 participating organization delegates also created a consensus definition of counseling. All three of these components are important aspects of the profession that guide the identity development of counselors.

In addition to the consensus definition of counseling, integration of professional training with personal attributes of the counselor is an additional factor in identity development. When training experiences and personal attributes are placed in the context of a professional community, as proposed through the work of the 20/20 working group, the counselor's identity is shaped. This professional identity process of integrating intrapersonal and interpersonal factors begins in early training experiences and continues throughout the career of the counselor (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010; Moss, Gibson, & Dollarhide, 2014). The counselor's identity includes specific transitional tasks throughout the career lifetime to solidify that identity as it evolves. These tasks are covered in the following sections.

Resources:

20/20 Consensus Definition of Counseling

https://www.counseling.org/about-us/about-aca/20-20-a-vision-for-the-future-of-counseling/consensus-definition-of-counseling

20/20 Statement of Principles

https://www.counseling.org/news/updates/by-year/2009/2009/01/20/20-20-statement-of-principles-advances-the-profession

IDENTIFICATION STRATEGIES OF COUNSELOR IDENTITY

There are many ways for professional counselors to identify their current stage of counselor identity development. For both those in training programs and those practicing, novice counselors have a strong reliance on external validation from others (i.e., professors, supervisors). This is tied to their sense of autonomy, and much of the focus in early training and practice is working on counseling skills. Successful

selection and implementation of counseling skills builds confidence that leads to more autonomy in practice and less reliance on external validation. However, there is a transition from external validation gained from supervisors to reinforcement gained through work with clients. "Across all levels and work settings, work with clients was most meaningful to counselors' professional identity development" (Moss et al., 2014, p. 8).

Another primary area for counselor identity development is the transition from idealist expectations about the career to the real job tasks that need to be completed. This is where job settings and requirements interact with the professional counseling community. For the majority of counselors, real aspects of the job may be part of counselor training in practica and internships. However, legal aspects of the job (e.g., insurance filing, access to records) may interfere with the ability of counselors-in-training to fully realize those responsibilities until they are in paid positions as counselors. There certainly is an adjustment period in which idealistic and realistic expectations have to be reconciled. Self-doubt and confidence struggles may be present, and the need for external validation may increase. During this time, counselors may also see their lives as counselors different or separate from other aspects of their personal selves. As they gain confidence and autonomy in their work as counselors, they begin to experience a more congruent identity in which their professional and personal selves have merged. This includes counselors thinking more systemically, seeing how they are part of the professional community, and understanding the responsibilities they have as part of that community. For example, reflecting an ethical responsibility, counselors in later stages of identity development will engage in more advocacy and social justice activities that promote the welfare of clients and the counseling profession (ACA, 2014; Moss et al., 2014; Reiner, Dobmeier, & Hernandez, 2013).

For those who are interested in more formal approaches to assessing identity of counselors, there are a few measures to use. Healey (2009) developed the Professional Identity and Values Scale (PIVS) that includes two subscales. First, the Professional Orientation and Values subscale consists of 18 items that assess the counselor's agreement with the counseling philosophy, standards associated with the practice of counseling, and the components of counseling (e.g., continuing education, professional relationships). Second, the Professional Development subscale consists of 14 items that assess the counselor's levels of identity development. Healey reported a coefficient alpha of .80 for the entire scale and convergent validity with the Professional Identity and Engagement Scale (PIES, Puglia, 2008) of .50.

A second instrument, created by Woo and Henfield (2015), is the Professional Identity Scale in Counseling (PISC). This scale consists of 53 items that include: Engagement Behaviors, Knowledge of the Profession, Attitude, Professional Roles and Expertise, Philosophy of the Profession, and Professional Values. Cronbach alphas ranged from .48 to .89 on these factors and evidence of convergent validity of the PISC total score with the PIVS subscale totals ranged from .513 to .709. Recently, Woo, Lu, and Bang (2018) reexplored the factor structure of the original PISC with a more stringent analysis approach to generate a short version of the PISC. With a participant pool of counselors-in-training, doctoral counseling students, counseling practitioners, and counselor educators, they obtained a four-factor, 16 item PISC-S. These factors include Professional Knowledge, Professional Competency, Attitude toward Profession, and Engagement in Counseling Profession. The PISC-S has good reliabilities across PISC factors (.72-.85) and positive correlation, ranging from .28 to .52 with both subscales of the PIVS. The authors interpretation indicates that the PISC-S may not be as comprehensive in measuring counselor identity as the PISC but the PISC-S provides a "basic framework for counselor educators in assisting their students to develop a counselor professional identity" (Woo et al., 2018, p. 149).

Resources:
PIVS: http://proxy.library.vcu.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/
      docview/89181807?accountid=14780
PISC: https://doi.org/10.1080/2326716X.2015.1040557
PISC-S: https://doi.org/10.1080/2326716X.2018.1452078

ENHANCING COUNSELOR IDENTITY

Because counselor identity is a developmental process, enhancing identity requires continual learning. This process begins in training programs and continues throughout the careers of counselors. The following suggestions may be helpful to counselors:

1. Review and create a definition of counseling. As mentioned earlier, the 20/20 working group created a consensus definition of counseling that counselors may find helpful in explaining their work to others. How can counselors explain this in their own words? Revisit this personal definition of counseling over the life of your career as it may need revision based on professional and personal evolution.

2. Be intentional in the use of specific theories and skills in practice. Review this with supervisors and peer mentors and solicit feedback from clients regarding the effectiveness of those practices. Remember, there is a need for external validation and reinforcement initially in the career. Along the career journey, counselors also often begin to specialize in specific skills or foci that may also require this feedback.

3. Related to #2, pursue professional development. Adopt the mindset and initiative of a lifelong learner. Professional development also means involvement with professional organizations through attendance of workshops and conferences. Counselors are encouraged to engage in both online and face-to-face professional development opportunities.

4. Network with other counseling professionals. This may be easier for some than others depending on work setting and/or geographic location. Networking is critical to the need for relationship in the professional identity development process. Counselors can learn about resources and needs in the community and can find others who are in similar and different stages of their counselor identity formation.

5. Seek and identify mentors or experienced guides. Over the course of a counselor's career, the needs of the counselor will change. It is important for the counselor to be able to process and seek the help of mentors in the field. For novice counselors, this may be a supervisor. Over time, this can evolve into peer mentors or several mentors. Counselors should not be shy in asking for this because there is an expectation in the profession that we will do this for each other.

6. Practice wellness. In Moss et al.'s (2014) study, there was a point at which the majority of the study participants were experiencing the possibility of burnout. Networking, having a mentor, and practicing professional development are all ways to monitor and prevent burnout. In addition, there are specific wellness activities that counselors can use including good nutrition, exercise, meditation, healthy relationships, and personal counseling.

7. Serve and lead in the profession. In addition to joining professional counseling organizations and attending professional conferences, volunteer to serve on committees, taskforces, and working groups. Our professional counseling organizations need counselors, students, and counselor educators to shape the direction of the profession. This includes leading as a committee chair and eventually as an elected leader for the profession. Counselors are leaders, and these activities will reinforce counselor identity as one that promotes and moves the profession forward.

8. Advocate for clients and the profession. Counselors are often used to empowering clients as a form of advocacy practice and will often advocate for and with them for specific purposes. Be intentional in enhancing advocacy skills, which may mean seeking professional development and networking with others to learn how to be effective in doing this. These skills can also be applied in advocating for the profession, which could lead to more systemic and political advocacy activities.

9. Mentor and supervise other counselors. As counselors seek mentorship and supervision to learn and gain more confidence, they can also provide this for others. Mentoring can be a mutual relationship of learning and support. Counselors can challenge themselves professionally and personally in being a mentor.

10. Learn from clients. We learn a lot from our clients if we keep our ears and eyes open, figuratively speaking. It is a privilege to be a counselor because we witness the human condition in the most vulnerable of circumstances. How do we apply what we learn from clients to our identities? If we don't know something, where can we learn or find resources? How do we know we are effective with clients? Learn how to evaluate it. What does advocating for my clients tell me about what I need to do for my profession?

Talk, serve, lead. In the journey of developing professional counseling identity, learn about the history of the profession, engage in the current trends, and anticipate the needs of the profession and its stakeholders as counseling continues to evolve. Counselor identity is an important concept that is unique to every professional; find what works for you in the larger context of our ever-evolving profession and pursue it with confidence and passion.

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