

Article 13

A Constructivist View of Research Planning

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Abstract

Much is written about the need for research in the field of counseling and about concerns that counselors frequently appear hesitant to conduct original research. Identifying research interests often develops through collaboration with colleagues. This study investigates the variables that influence research interest identification and how collaboration and constructivism factor into this process. This phenomenological study identified five themes that impact the development of research interests: social justice; life experiences; professional identity development; collaboration with colleagues/opportunity; and innovation/knowledge.

Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prodding with a purpose.

Zora Neale Hurston

Introduction

Establishing a research agenda often begins with a kernel of an idea that is then developed through collaboration with colleagues. Collaboration inspires discussion on what is happening in the field, why things happen the way they do, and if any empirical data supports the methods used in practice. Nothing compares to the intellectual conversation and sparring that occurs when working through ideas, concepts, and possibilities with colleagues. This constructivist process is essential to the further development of sound practice.

Collaboration and taking a constructivist approach to identifying research interests can provide the researcher with varied perspectives leading to the formation of alternative and creative ways of framing counseling phenomenon. The constructivist

approach is based on an individual's construction of knowledge as they experience the world and assign meaning to experiences. "Most constructivists agree learning occurs when individuals assimilate new information into existing mental models of the world, or construct—as a result of discrepant insights—new models that can accommodate both old and new insights gained from experience" (Geer & Rudge, 2002, p. 2). As researchers in the field of professional counseling, developing new models or adding to the knowledge base of the field is essential to the continued development of professional counseling.

Much continues to be written about the need for research in the field of counseling and about concerns that counselors frequently appear hesitant to jump into the research pond. Wester and Borders (2014) in their Delphi study of research competencies for counseling address not only the continued imperative for research in counseling, but also call into question the quality of counseling research. Specifically, they acknowledge that "although the reason for the ongoing concern is unclear, the consistent weaknesses found in empirical submissions and publication call into question individuals' training and competence in research" (Wester & Borders, 2014, p. 447). Kaplan, as cited in Shallcross (2012), stated "As a whole, the counseling profession has been more resistant than other helping professions to the push from healthcare and government to back treatments up with research, in part because counselors don't generally like to do research" (p. 1).

Whether the lack of research studies and/or lack of interest in conducting research is due to training or is dispositional is unclear. However, what is clear is that this gap in the profession needs to be addressed. So, how do we get anyone to do anything? Create interest. Hence, the goal of this study is to understand the variables that may influence research interest identification.

Research in the Field of Professional Counseling

Research is creating new knowledge.

Neil Armstrong

Establishing a knowledge base is a key aspect to the development of any profession. Researchers in young professions have an increased imperative to participate in research, do it well, and add to the growth of the knowledge base. Professional counseling is a comparatively young field of study—the American Counseling Association was not established until 1952. The first state law was not adopted until 1976 with a Virginia statute (Gladding, 2004). As developers of a young profession, counseling professionals are in the process of expanding the field's knowledge base and strengthening its professional identity. The call for research in counseling spans the history of the profession. For example, the *20/20 Initiative: A Vision for the Future of Counseling* is the American Counseling Association's coordinated and consolidated effort to strengthen the identity of professional counseling and to expand the knowledge base through research (Rollins, 2007). And as recently as 2013, West-Olatunji wrote that the next step in the profession's development and advancement is to focus greater emphasis on empirical research.

With this call for active engagement in research, participation in the research process often begins early in a graduate counselor education program. Specifically,

counselor education programs minimally require one or more research courses. This coursework is often followed by encouragement to continue the research process throughout professional life. Reedy (2009) wrote that a major goal for all graduate students should be to create a research agenda—regardless of career goals, theoretical interests, or methodological preferences. The large number of students taking research courses and the number of counselor educators teaching those courses is striking, with over 4,500 postsecondary degree-granting institutions (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013) and over 650 counselor education programs in the United States (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2014). Given the engagement of academics in research education and the increased demand to expand the knowledge base, it is surprising that a review of the literature found little peer-reviewed research and information on *how* counselor educators and other professionals might assist students in identifying and developing research interests.

While a paucity of formal literature is available in this regard, recommendations from informal sources identified factors that may influence or drive research interest identification. Recommendations for creating research interests are available on multiple university Web sites. The University of Washington’s Mentor Memo identifies factors that influence research inquiry, including discussion with faculty, working with other students with like interests, and exposure to resources outside your current focus in order to expand research interests (Reedy, 2009). Ryder (2003), previously a professor at Rutgers University and currently a professor at Virginia Tech, presented intellectual curiosity, interest, innovation, and collaboration as influences on selecting a research agenda. Luse, Mennecke, and Townsend (2012) identified brainstorming, thinking outside of one’s academic area, collaboration, and continual critical inquiry as techniques that foster creative thinking in the research topic identification process. A common thread throughout these recommendations is that a research agenda is an active, dynamic, and frequently collaborative process.

Constructivism

If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?
Albert Einstein

As Einstein’s quote highlights, our daily activities and practices often go unnoticed—until we notice them. Once activities are noticed, studying, deconstructing, and then constructing them becomes known as research. Constructivism is a model or paradigm of learning (Cobern, 1993; Geer & Rudge, 2002).

Constructivist learning is based on students’ active participation in problem-solving and critical thinking regarding a learning activity which they find relevant and engaging. They are “constructing” their own knowledge by testing ideas and approaches based on their prior knowledge and experience, applying these to a new situation, and integrating the new knowledge gained with pre-existing intellectual constructs. (Concept to Classroom, 2004, p. 1)

As Coburn (1993) wrote, “constructivist theory lends itself readily to practical application. . . one of the attractions is its utter simplicity” (pp. 105–106). This focus on

practical application is wholly consistent with the definition of counseling and is the ultimate research goal.

As defined by 29 counseling associations, including the American Counseling Association, “counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals” (Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014, p. 368). Yet while constructivism leads to practical application, which is consistent with the definition of counseling, greater emphasis needs to be placed on creating a counseling research base to drive our practical application toward more empirical assessment. With constructivism as a learning model, we can begin to use our collaborative efforts as counselors to drive our practical efforts into more empirical studies and consequential publications.

Collaboration

In the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too) those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed.
Charles Darwin

As construction of knowledge from experience is a part of human nature, collaboration is a result of the human as a social animal. Humans naturally seek to form cognitive maps that fit their experience of the world. As social animals, humans frequently seek confirmation and collaboration in defining the intricacies and boundaries of these constructs; therefore, it is intuitive that collaboration in research would be on the increase, as it allows for group discussions that develop, challenge, and reconceptualize ideas (Arvaja, 2012). Specifically, there is an increasing trend in co-authorship, an important collaborative process. Hunter and Leahey (2008) wrote that the more established sciences (e.g., biology, physics, biochemistry, and chemistry) had a strikingly high level of co-authorship with 95% of articles co-authored in major periodicals. They investigated whether younger professions, in particular sociology, had a similar rate of co-authorship. Hunter and Leahy (2008) found 11% of articles from 1935 to 1940 were coauthored as compared to almost half of the articles published in two top Sociology journals between 2000 and 2005. In a review of the literature, Zawacki-Richter and von Prummer (2010) reported increases in co-authorship in multiple disciplines—distance education, sociology, political science, criminology, psychology, and economics. Clearly, this increase in collaboration is seen in multiple disciplines.

With collaboration and co-authorship on the rise, defining what constitutes successful collaboration becomes of interest. Hara, Solomon, Kim and Sonnenwald (2003) identified four factors that impacted collaboration among scientists. These factors are: compatibility, work style, writing style, work priority, and other forms of compatibility, including reciprocity in each others expertise, interests and value of work, awareness and access, and the development of relationships (professional and friendships). Capobianco (2007) described five key characteristics of collaborative research. These characteristics are: 1) mutually defined research questions; 2) collaboration to investigate practical solutions; 3) researchers that are knowledgeable about the research methods appropriate to the context; 4) researchers that share ongoing critical reflections as part of the research process; and 5) research results that are shared

and contribute to the knowledge base. As evidenced by the above factors and characteristics, an identified shared research interest or question is fundamental to the research process. This study investigates the variables that influence the identification of research interest of academics in the social sciences and explores how collaboration and constructivism factor into this process.

The Study

Research Question

The majority of counselors and counselors-in-training have taken research courses. However, this has not translated into widespread research and publication by counselors in the field. This phenomenon was a discussion point among the authors of this article and their professional colleagues. One salient piece of information identified as missing—and of interest—was what factors spark interest in an area of research. This study asked the research question: what influences a published professional's identification of the topics they research?

Research Design

The phenomenological approach was the qualitative research design used in this study. Qualitative research is defined as:

a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. . . . At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3)

Specifically, the phenomenological research design investigates the “lived experience” of the person who has experienced the phenomenon (Waters, 2014). “The type of problem best suited for this form of research is one in which it is important to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences of a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60).

The goal of this study was to investigate the experiences of published professionals and contextual influences on the development of their research interests. Important in this study was both the individual experiences of the participants and then the common experiences of this phenomenon. Hence, the phenomenological approach was the most appropriate design for this study as it allowed the individual to describe their experiences and identify the factors that may have influenced those experiences.

The Researchers

The research team consisted of three individuals. The first author, a European American, has been a certified professional school counselor since 1993, a certified school psychologist since 1999, and a counselor educator since 2004. The first author made an effort to be aware of her identity and subsequent biases and declared preexisting assumptions. For example, she believed that the lack of knowledge on how research interests were identified was a weakness in counselor education. She believed that she had biases based on her educational background (e.g., valuing higher education), her

occupation (e.g., her beliefs regarding the importance of self-awareness in the research process), and the salience of research in her professional development.

The second author, a European American, who is a candidate in a master's level counseling program, consulted with the two other researchers and authors on all stages of the study and reviewed the data analysis process. She made an effort to be aware of her assumptions. She kept her biases in mind as she conducted interviews and consulted with co-authors through the process.

The third author, a European American, who is a candidate in a master's level counseling program, consulted with the two other researchers and authors on all stages of the study and reviewed the data analysis process. She believed that scholars' research agendas stemmed from opportunity and were dictated by academic advisors, particularly at the graduate and doctoral levels. The second and third authors had the same biases as the first author, and the three met to discuss their existing assumptions.

Prior to data collection, the researchers practiced epoche. Each researcher described, discussed and reflected on their experiences with research interest development. Although the second and third authors were not published at that time, they had participated in the research process and had presented on a national level.

Standards of Trustworthiness

The phenomenon of trustworthiness refers to the conceptual soundness and standards of credibility with which research is judged in the qualitative paradigm. (Kline, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Williams & Morrow, 2009). Trustworthiness in this study is demonstrated in the coherent purpose of the study, the approach, methods, analysis and presentation of the results. The use of triangulation, an awareness of potential researcher bias, and an examination of negative cases were all applied to establish credibility of the findings. Peer review was also used to reduce the likelihood of any error throughout the research process. Peer review was done by authors and one outside academic. Along with standards to ensure rigor in the qualitative data analysis, the authors analyzed the data in a series of steps to ensure accuracy in the description of the data. These steps included each researcher analyzing and coding the data individually; the research team coming together to identify themes; each researcher reflecting on the data and themes discussed; and additional meetings to gain consensus on the themes identified. Additionally, peer review was used prior to theme identification and post theme identification.

Participants

A purposeful sampling method was used in this study. Participants were identified as professionals in various areas of social sciences who were published. The participant selection was inclusive of academics in various areas of social sciences in order to gain a broader perspective on research interest identification. Polkinghorne (as cited in Hays & Wood, 2011) recommends a sample size of 5–25 in phenomenological studies. The participants consisted of 14 individuals who identified as professors. All 14 of the participants were currently employed in either full-time tenure track positions or adjunct positions. Ten of the participants were female; four of the participants were male. Participants' years of experience in the field spanned from 6 to 33 years. All currently

work in institutions in the Northeastern United States. Additionally, all participants were born and raised in the United States.

Data Collection/Interview Questions

Since human subjects were involved in this study, IRB approval was received. Informed consent protocol, as approved by the IRB, was followed. Once participants consented to participate in the study, researchers met with them to begin the data collection process. Hays and Wood (2011) indicated that primarily interviews are used in phenomenological research studies. The qualitative format of individual interviews was used to collect the data. The interview format was either an individual face-to-face interview or a phone interview. Field notes were used as the data storage method in this study. Hunt (2011) noted that asking fewer and broader questions could result in a richer narrative. This study's interview protocol used a broad stroke, or approach, to gather data from the individual's narrative about their experience. The interview protocol was: "We are studying how professors identify and develop their research interests and agendas. This study is using a narrative approach. Hence, we would like you to tell us about your process."

Data Analysis

Waters (2014, p. 1) wrote, "The first principle of analysis of phenomenological data is to use an emergent strategy, to allow the method of analysis to follow the nature of the data itself." An emergent strategy was used in this study's data analysis. Specifically, Hycner's five-step explication process of data analysis as cited in Groenewald (2004) was used. The explication process begins with bracketing or epoche. This step was done prior to data collection and focused on identifying the researchers' preconceptions. The second step is delineating units of meaning and these units were extracted from each interview by each of the researchers. The information was then used to establish themes that appeared to emerge in interviews. Each interview was then summarized and themes were extracted. Additionally, peer review was used prior to theme identification and post theme identification.

Results and Discussion

Data analysis revealed five themes that emerged from our research question; what influences a published professional's identification of his or her research interest(s). The five themes were: Collaboration/Opportunity; Social Justice; Professional Identity Development; Knowledge/Innovation; and Life Experiences. A literature review of the themes is presented along with narrative excerpts from participants on how these themes emerged in the development of their research interests/agendas.

Collaboration/Opportunity

As discussed earlier, collaboration is an essential part of constructivism, as it allows for the shared experience of developing and reconceptualizing ideas based on past knowledge. The increase in co-authorship is a trend in the empirical literature, as group participation also allows for a collective development of novel ideas and innovation through the sharing of knowledge (Connell, Kriz, & Thorpe, 2014; Vila, Perez, & Morillas, 2012). This is made evident when looking at the most important creative

insights, which have emerged from collaborative works (Sawyer, 2006). The most successfully innovative companies and organizations are those who work collaboratively. Collaboration also gives an opportunity for those involved to develop, gain, and expand their knowledge base by learning and observing others perceptions, insights, experiences, customs, culture, education, work ethics, values and beliefs (Anderson, Friedemann, Buscher, Sansoni, & Hodnicki, 2012). This in turn allows researchers or practitioners to find where current knowledge and research may benefit from expansion, improvement, insight, and awareness.

For the purposes of this study, collaboration was defined as the act of working with someone to produce or create something. The data analysis identified collaboration as a thread woven amongst our participants' research endeavors. Subjects employed the collaborative process as a means of furthering their research, which highlighted new opportunities for further investigation.

One counseling education professor spoke almost exclusively about collaboration being a driving force in his research throughout his career. He stated that the focus of his most fruitful research had emerged from discussions over lunch with students and colleagues. One lunch conversation spurred three or four years of research and led to numerous publications. He noted that because his work has no single compelling topic, the vein of collaborating with others had always been a significant motivation in his research. He described his research interests as stemming from seeking answers to questions that were necessary and grounded in the reality of practice. After seeking and not finding answers to questions, he worked with others to formulate and define hypotheses, and then to conduct research.

In another interview, a professor pointed out that people are doing interesting things in their practice, and a part of her role as a researcher and scholar was to join with them in telling their story. She strives to work from other's narratives to illustrate approaches that need to be told. She maintains a stance of social activism and a commitment to honoring the voice of those with whom she collaborates.

In her work with students, a counseling psychology professor works directly with master's level counselors-in-training in applied research. She encourages her students to integrate the theory of student-centered development by constantly challenging the edges of directivity and non-directivity. While being directive in her supervision of student-trainees' work with clients, this professor also allows students to practice non-traditional interventions such as play therapy in group work.

In addition to her research on effective therapy within a specific theoretical orientation, this professor also studied the concept of boundaries within the counseling profession. She used this concept in her research as she involved other counseling professionals to participate in research that deals indirectly with boundaries within a person-centered framework. The knowledge she gained by collaborating with other counseling professionals (i.e., studying how they interact with clients) continues to further advance her research question.

Another counseling psychology professor developed her research agenda from her collaborative work with colleagues and students. While her topic was constructed independently, the origins of the topic came from observing her students struggling with certain aspects of social problem solving and multiculturalism. This professor also spoke of how helpful her advisor was with brainstorming ideas for her research. The

collaboration with her advisor helped in her creative process of developing research ideas.

A communications professor used collaboration in her attainment of research material. She was studying rhetorical persuasion and media and needed assistance from certain magazine publications to analyze data. If she were not able to collaborate with outside sources to obtain her database, her research would have never passed its initial phases of construction. Similarly, an English professor collaborated with another professor on communication aesthetics, first amendment rights, and film censorship. Each had backgrounds in different aspects of these three areas. Their mutual collaboration allowed for both of them to take their background knowledge of materials and incorporate new knowledge that developed a unique perspective of political/societal means of communication in nineteenth century film censorship.

Social Justice

The term “social justice” is an important concept in the counseling and counselor-education professions. Social justice made a profound impact on the counseling profession, beginning with Frank Parson's advocacy work in career counseling towards marginalized populations in the early 1900s (Bemak, Chi-Ying Chung, Talleyrand, Jones, & Daquin, 2011). While Parson's work began in the early stages of career counseling's professional development, the counseling profession as a whole has shifted its focus over the years from psychoanalytic to behavioral to humanistic to multicultural and now to social justice orientation (Chang, Crethar, & Ratts, 2011).

The American Counseling Association (ACA) developed Advocacy Competencies that involve the implementation of social justice practice on individual, communal, and systems levels. Counselors are encouraged to provide individual and collective efforts towards implementing change so individuals can live in a more just and peaceful society (Brady-Amoon, 2011). Social justice seeks to minimize oppression, discrimination, and disenfranchisement with the goal of providing empowerment to those marginalized, along with fair and equitable treatment and access to services and resources (Brady-Amoon, 2011; Glosoff & Durham, 2010; Shin, 2008). Specific forms of social justice can be viewed through the life-experiences of power, cultural values, world-views, sociopolitical, historical, socioeconomic status, racism, discrimination, biases, privilege, conflicts, and emotions (Chung & Bemak, 2013).

As noted earlier, ACA president, West-Olatunji (2013) provided four reasons for why the counseling profession should place greater emphasis on research. Her fourth reason included that counselor research should give voice to lived experience, which can serve as a buffer against marginalization within the mental health community. Throughout the interviews, many professors reported a dedication to social justice as a driving force in their research. They discussed ways in which they felt compelled to give voice to underrepresented populations and a strong desire to right wrongs.

One professor discussed her dedication to giving voice to girls and girl culture, citing ways in which teen culture is often described. Often, she noted, “teen culture” is discussed with males being the center of the culture, and girls are often written into that culture as accessories. Her research went further to examine the ways school dress codes discriminate against and create barriers to girls' education. Throughout the interview, this professor investigated her own emotions as well as her students' responses. She went on

to note her motivation for seeking a doctoral degree was to become an authoritative voice for underrepresented and marginalized populations.

Another professor interviewed discussed his desire to “backfill” injustice. He did this as a means to call attention to the history of oppression that existed in his field throughout the last century. He described challenging the professional literature that was published under the director of a specific journal editor that, in turn, dictated how that population was being represented through his field’s practice for nearly 30 years. He sought to create awareness in practitioners through deeply examining the implications of editorship and unjust publications.

Interestingly, one professor interviewed discussed her research agenda in terms of strands that represent her interests. She noted that the strands of her research interests are not always present, but that the strand of feminism is always incorporated into her work. As she works, strands such as white privilege, attention to socio-economic status, feminism, inequality, philosophy and narrative inquiry are often present. She noted that much of her work stemmed from personal experience or contemporary moral and ethical dilemmas.

An English professor also spoke of her interest in feminism, as well as first amendment rights. Her dissertation focused on communication aesthetics and film censorship. Through research and observation of how elitist populations tried to censor certain messages to prevent lower classes from stepping out of their roles in society, this professor was able to depict the socio-political climate of the early 1900s. This research highlights how politics were shaped through the "censory" lens of the film industry. While her research did not serve as a pro-active message of current research and practice of social justice, it was an informative measure of our historical evolution into current social justice issues.

Another example of social justice was seen in a counseling psychology professor who initiated all of her research ideas under two umbrella topics: health (physical and mental) and social problem solving (within diverse populations). In doing this, she constructed new ways to approach health and problem solving from a multicultural vantage point. Her aim was to research groups who came from disadvantaged, underprivileged, and lower socioeconomic classes and investigate the role minority status played in their health and problem solving capabilities.

Another counseling psychology professor spoke of her interest in marginalized populations, specifically geriatric populations who were victims of elder financial abuse. Her interests in this population were grounded in her desire to seek social justice for vulnerable populations and to maintain their social well-being. This professor spoke considerably about "ethical underdogs," and how she has to take a firmer stance in protecting their rights. She asserts that certain targeted populations need advocacy and attention more than others, due to the fact that these populations are more susceptible to discrimination, abuse, bias, and neglect. Her research is aimed at social well-being and effective therapeutic practice, as she believes that certain forms of social justice must prevail before the aforementioned aims can be achieved.

Professional Identity Development

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) identified professional identity as professional leadership, supervision, practice, and research through developing expertise, collaborative relationships,

participation in professional organizations, and contribution to scholarly research (Dollarhide, Gibson, & Moss, 2013). Trede, Macklin, and Bridges (2012) viewed professional identity through the lens of higher education, stressing the importance of learning professional roles, comprehending workplace cultures, professional socialization, and educating towards citizenship.

Professional identity also includes both intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Moss, Gibson, & Dollarhide, 2014). For example, Dollarhide et al. (2013) found that masters level counselor trainees evolved in their professional identity development from seeking external validation to experiencing validation by meeting internal standards (integration and autonomy). Depending on the context or developmental process, counselor professional identity is viewed as a process of continuous growth and development that integrates both the professional (collaborative) and personal (autonomy) self. Both processes, whether professional or personal provide counseling professionals with the opportunity to use research as a means to engage with and within their field of study.

Throughout our interviews, certain participants identified the development of their professional identity as a motivator in their research. Sutherland & Markauskaite (2012) stated that professional identity development aims to forge a relationship with and within the profession by engagement within a community a practice. Many of our participants explained in their own words how they sought to define who they were within their profession.

An example of a personal process of identity development was seen with a professor who discussed his role as a researcher in terms of helping to define the profession as well as the history of the profession. How we define ourselves, he explained, leads to where the field goes in the future. He viewed philosophical and historical research as a determinant in the future trends of his field.

Similarly, a counseling psychology professor explained how she wanted to make her research inform her practice as well as her practice informs her research. Her research stems from her work in the field, and her work in the field continues to birth new research endeavors. She also explained how she delved into the construct of white racial identity and social problem solving because she thought that her voice as a researcher would be more relevant and inspiring if she worked with constructs that were more consistent with her personal and professional identity. Again, the constructivist theory is present in this professor's ability to construct new research by finding meaning from her own life and applying it to current professional practice.

An example of a collaborative process of identity development was seen with a professor who discussed how she continued to ask herself what her role is for her students, and how she in turn helps her students develop their own sense of professional identity throughout their professional preparation. The theme of professional identity development is an ever-present anchor in her work.

Similarly, a counseling psychology professor simultaneously develops her own professional identity along with the professional identity development of her students. For example, one of her research questions, "What is effective therapy?" is explored through a person-centered theoretical framework. By fostering inquiry among her students, she is able to advance her students' development by incorporating her own theoretical orientation *vis-a-vis* supervision style which incorporates her students'

research interests and internship work. Her use of person-centered directive/non-directive counseling techniques with her students in research endeavors allowed her professional identity to be part of her research. It also allows her students to openly and creatively explore new research interests. Here again, the constructivist paradigm is used in the development of research as well as fostering research interests among students.

Professional identity development is itself constructivist. As one professor noted, as she has progressed in her profession, from student to professor, her life has evolved; becoming a wife and mother influenced her research interests and how she viewed herself within the profession. These experiences are reflected in her research as well as her professional (and personal) development.

Knowledge/Innovation

Organizational learning requires constructing and combining knowledge as well as developing new knowledge in the process (Moustaghfir & Schiuma, 2013). This idea is consistent with the constructivist process. Yet many students are taught that knowledge is static and complete. Instead of learning to produce new knowledge, they believe that they must become experts at consuming knowledge or rote learning (Sawyer, 2006).

Too few students are taught that the success of any organization is determined by how one is able to learn and innovate effectively (Moustaghfir & Schiuma 2013; Purcarea, Benavideas Espinosa & Apetrei, 2013). Innovation occurs when one is able to combine old knowledge with new knowledge; essentially creating something different (Purcarea et al., 2013). Essentially, this is the essence of constructivism. Throughout several interviews, professors discussed how their research originated from a desire to contribute to new best practices within their field. These innovative approaches often came from an absence of knowledge in their field of study.

One professor noted that his research often stemmed from failed searches for answers. Frequently, his review of current literature would yield answers to questions. However, when answers were inadequate or non-existent, a research question was formed. His research was often dictated by what he deemed necessary and grounded in the reality of the current practices in the field.

A counseling psychology professor investigated counselors' perceptions and biases using an unconventional medium for observation. She wanted to learn more about how counselors' perceptions of clients are altered due to certain factors or contexts. While her means of conducting research were initially met with resistance (due to the unconventional medium used for observation), her findings provided new knowledge to the field and increased awareness for future research endeavors.

This particular counseling psychology professor is passionate about theory. She even noted with pride that she received a perfect score on the theory section of her licensing exam. Her hunger for knowledge is made evident in how she continues to learn both past and present material on specific theoretical orientations that are pertinent to her research. She not only excels in generating unique ways of combining old knowledge into new knowledge in her research, but also in using applied research with her students.

Life Experiences

Life experiences can be used as resources for learning by giving personal meaning to learned activities (Arvaja, 2012). Knowledge, whether institutionalized or personal, can connect through one's own personal experience. This allows researchers to make

sense of information through their own attached meaning, which is part of the constructivist paradigm. Bringing meaning to one's personal life experiences through research was a theme present in our participant's reports of their experiences; their colleagues experiences; and in the scholarly literature.

Nick Ladany (2004), a renowned professor in counseling supervision, wrote about how he began his research in counseling supervision. As a graduate student, he learned what a counseling supervisor should not be, and subsequently, wanted to research supervision in the counseling field to determine whether his personal experiences with supervisors were the exception or the rule. His journey—from experience to research—has been to learn “how supervision can be most effective through the discovery of what is ineffective” (p. 2).

Participants in this study had similar experiences to Ladany. They discussed how past experiences led to the desire to improve or enhance future research. For example, an art education professor stated that her interests are based entirely from a desire to improve upon past outcomes. Her intent was to bridge her teaching experiences with contributions to best practices in the field. Similarly, another professor described two particular incidents that demonstrated inequality of access to education for girls in a public school system. As a public school teacher, this professor felt that she did not have a voice. This experience inspired her to seek a doctoral degree as a means of empowering herself and becoming an advocate for others.

Another example of how our participants used experiences in life as catalysts for future research was a counseling psychology professor whose doctoral dissertation explored marital conventionality and personality predictors of marital satisfaction and adjustment. The participant shared her childhood experiences of parents who “loved to hate each other.” Most of her friends had parents who were divorced, yet she couldn't understand why her parents were not. The concept of divorce was also shown in her research of psychology undergraduate students observing a video of a child on the playground.

An English professor made similar connections from her experience as a child to her research. This professor enjoyed watching black and white films as child. She felt restricted growing up, and watching movies was her escape. During her high school and undergraduate years, she became interested in first amendment rights and censorship. When she connected with a fellow professor who was studying communication aesthetics, the research project took flight and the two ran with both their ideas in a linear, collaborative effort.

Other professors used their interests in past experiences as future topics for research. A theatre professor recalled that from a young age she invented languages. She did not enjoy speaking to others except through the guise of make believe and her personally formed languages. She developed an interest in language and theatre as she pursued her academic endeavors. She became fascinated with theatre as a living form of communication, where the only stable factor was the script. The actors, directors, costume designers, and audience presented and influenced the messages both within and independent of the script. Additionally, she viewed her interest in theatre as synonymous with her teaching, noting that teaching is theatre and theatre is teaching.

Personal meaning and interest was also shown with the professor who earlier described her research agenda in strands, citing important threads that drove her forward

in her work. Her personal experiences exist within each of the strands of her research. From growing up on a farm, to becoming a mother, to understanding her white identity, her personal life experiences are salient aspects of her research. Similarly, a communication professor claimed that every research project—from graduate work to doctoral dissertation—came from her own life experiences. She believes that one must have their own interest, experiences, and curiosity woven into research, since the process is long and extensive. She claimed that research would become difficult if a student/professional choose a subject that he or she were not interested in or passionate about. This professor used various life experiences such as food, cooking, and magazines as means to produce research material relevant to public relations and communications.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to investigate those variables that influence how research interests are identified and the role of collaboration and consultation in this process. Participants in this study indicated that their research interests develop through five themes: Collaboration/Opportunity; Social Justice; Professional Identity Development; Knowledge/Innovation; and Life Experiences. These five themes all evidenced forms of the constructivist process and collaboration and were identified as factors involved in developing research interests and agendas. These five themes reflected the frames from which counselors develop both research interests and empirically based practice. Many of these themes represent important topics for the counseling profession, including social justice and professional identity.

These themes identify where the seeds of research interests are planted. Knowledge of these entry points provides counselor educators with insight into: opportunities for mentoring; curriculum development; a paradigm shift in how research is introduced; the collaborative process; professional identity development; and the importance of social justice. The impact of mentoring was evidenced by many of the participants and had a great impact on an individual's academic and research trajectory. Mentoring is a critical part of the counselor education process. Expansion of this process to purposefully incorporate research interest exploration would seem to be best practice. Curriculum development and a paradigm shift in how research is taught may include, or expand content to include, the importance of active engagement in research and the professor may model or share their research identification process. Collaboration is a mainstay in the field of counseling. Shifting the focus of these conversations to incorporate research ideas and the initiation of empirical research studies would create opportunities for comprehensive professional engagement. Professional identity development may strength as a result of this comprehensive professional engagement. And, lastly, the importance of social justice across disciplines was confirming in the realization that the critical need for attention to social justice is a widely recognized need.

This study showed the creative processes of developing research interests among higher education professors. The study suggested that research interest identification is, once examined, a purposeful and creative process adding to the interest, liveliness, professionalism, and professional identity of professional counselors. Future research on this topic would add to the knowledge base on how counselors-in-training, counselor educators, and counseling professionals establish their research interests and what influences that process. This information would increase the transparency of the process

and may ultimately result in greater utilization of research and research-based practices in counseling. Future studies may investigate the research interests of counselors not only in academia, but also working in the field. Another consideration for future study would include asking this research question to counseling students to garner insight into what factors play into their own research interests and ideas about research interests. A limitation of this study, which is often a limitation of qualitative research, is that the number of participants was small.

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