
Professional Identity: A Qualitative Inquiry of Experienced Counsellors L'identité professionnelle de conseillers et conseillères expérimentés : Une étude qualitative

Sara Alves
Nicola Gazzola
University of Ottawa

ABSTRACT

There are many recent changes to the practice of counselling and psychotherapy in Canada. Newly established statutory regulation of psychotherapy in Ontario and Quebec, and new legislation in the province of Nova Scotia protecting the title “counselling therapist,” are examples of an emerging trend in Canada that seeks to clearly define the various mental health professions. This study employed a variation of grounded theory method to investigate how counsellors experienced their professional identities. Nine experienced master’s-level counsellors in a midsized Canadian city were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. The main goal was to develop an understanding of how they define themselves as professionals, with a focus on what they perceived as being the major influences on their professional identity. Eight major themes emerged, and a provisional model was proposed, consisting of three categories: (a) core of professional identity, (b) key influences on professional identity, and (c) instrumental influences on professional identity. Implications for counsellor education and counselling practice are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

Au Canada plusieurs modifications ont été apportées récemment à la pratique du counseling et de la psychothérapie. Des règlements statutaires ont été nouvellement établis en Ontario et au Québec et des nouvelles lois décrétées dans la province de la Nouvelle Écosse destinées à protéger le titre « thérapeute en counseling » donnent des exemples d’une nouvelle tendance au Canada cherchant à clairement définir les divers intervenants dans le milieu de la santé mentale. Pour cette étude, on a employé une variation d’une méthode de codification basée sur la théorie ancrée [Grounded Theory] pour investiguer comment des intervenants en counseling vivent l’expérience de leur identité professionnelle propre en tant que pratiquants. Neuf intervenants au niveau de la maîtrise dans une ville de grandeur moyenne ont été interviewés par moyen d’un protocole semi-structuré pour développer une compréhension de comment ils se définissent eux-mêmes en tant que professionnels, mettant l’accent sur ce qu’ils perçoivent comme ayant le plus d’influence dans leur identité professionnelle. Huit thèmes majeurs ont fait surface, et un modèle provisionnel a été proposé consistant de trois catégories : (a) fondement de l’identité professionnelle, (b) influences clés sur l’identité professionnelle, et (c) influences instrumentales sur l’identité professionnelle. Les implications des résultats pour la formation des intervenants en counseling et pour la pratique du counseling sont aussi abordées.

In comparison to other mental health professions (e.g., social work, psychiatry, and clinical psychology), counselling is a relatively new profession (Hershenson & Power, 1987). Although counselling has sought to differentiate itself from other helping professions (Neimeyer & Diamond, 2001), it seems to be most similar to counselling psychology as the two have always shared a common history and substantial overlapping memberships (Goodyear, 2000). Indeed, the titles “counsellor” and “counselling psychologist” are often used interchangeably in the literature (Neimeyer & Diamond, 2001; Schoen, 1989). Yet, notwithstanding some of the overlap among mental health professions, there are general differences between them that largely centre on the amount of graduate training and educational background. While there can be considerable overlap between the work of counsellors, social workers, and clinical and counselling psychologists (Goodyear, 2000), counsellors tend to have a master’s in counselling or a related field, social workers have a master’s in social work, and both counselling psychologists and clinical psychologists generally hold a doctorate in their respective fields. A number of Canadian provinces, however, allow master’s-level practitioners to register as psychologists (see <http://www.oaccpp.ca/home.html>).

Counsellors are increasingly called upon to treat a variety of mental health concerns, and yet their sense of professional identity remains unclear to the public, allied mental health professionals, and counsellors themselves (Gazzola & Smith, 2007). Having a solid professional identity is particularly important in the counselling profession as counselling continues its effort to establish itself as a legitimate field with a unique identity and not as merely emulating other professions (Pelling & Whetham, 2006).

The definition of professional identity varies in the literature. Schoen (1989) speculates that one method of defining the identity of counsellors is to focus on specific activities that they perform and that professional identity rests upon professional roles. Salient issues regarding the roles and functions of counsellors centre on questions about professional activities, work settings, and client populations (Goldschmitt, Tipton, & Wiggins, 1981). Mrdjenovich and Moore (2004) define professional identity as a sense of connection to the values and emphasis of a profession as a whole. However, researchers generally agree that professional identity indicates one’s work values, abilities, and knowledge; a sense of unity among the implicated professionals; and possessing personal responsibility to the profession, conducting oneself ethically and morally, and experiencing feelings of pride for the profession (Brott & Myers, 1999; Gale & Austin, 2003; Hiebert & Uhlemann, 1993; VanZandt, 1990).

Individual professional identity includes one’s personal work values, skills and knowledge, growth as a person, success and improvement at work, and imagination and innovation (Gazzola & Smith, 2007). *Collective professional identity* refers to the status of a profession, a shared identity and universal role among its members, and an appreciation for the history of a profession (Gale & Austin, 2003). Although there can be considerable overlap regarding the issues that contribute to one’s individual professional identity and one’s perception of the collective

professional identity of counselling, these concepts are not isomorphic. For instance, it is possible that counsellors have solid individual professional identities while simultaneously perceiving the collective identity of the profession as weak (see Gazzola & Smith, 2007; Gazzola, Smith, King-Andrews, & Kearney, 2010).

Researchers have addressed professional identity struggles and have identified some potential challenges to counsellors' sense of professional identity: (a) there are differences in training, specialization, professional affiliations, and credentialing (Gale & Austin, 2003); (b) counselling is a newer profession relative to allied mental health professions (Hershenson & Power, 1987); (c) counselling falls somewhere between education and psychology (Goodyear, 2000); (d) counsellors have shared purposes and roles with allied mental health professionals (Pelling, 2004); (e) counsellors holding dual memberships in associations that focus on different fields have mixed allegiances (Domke, 1982); (f) others may have misperceptions about counselling (Nelson & Jackson, 2003; Swickert, 1997); and (g) counsellors tend to work in a variety of settings, with varied client groups, and use a range of theories and practice (Gazzola & Smith, 2007).

With the diversified roles that counsellors play within the mental health sector (Gale & Austin, 2003), it is important to develop a clearer understanding of what distinguishes them from other mental health professionals. An unclear professional identity can have implications on the professional's effort and security (Blocher, Tennyson, & Johnson, 1963); pride and stability (Nelson & Jackson, 2003); work roles, boundaries, and activities (Schoen, 1989); awareness of the services provided; and overall satisfaction (Remley & Herlihy, 2005) within the profession. Thus, professional identity development is not only crucial to one's individual growth as a professional, but it can also impact the services provided to those with whom professionals come into contact (Brott & Myers, 1999).

Counsellor development models established by Hogan (1964), Loganbill, Hardy, and Delworth (1982), and Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003) indirectly contribute to the discussion on counsellor professional identity. While each of these three major counsellor development models differs in the number of stages, they each propose a similar progression and share comparable themes. Early in their careers, counsellors tend to be insecure, lack insight and control of their personal boundaries, and rely upon others for guidance (weaker sense of professional identity); in the middle stages of their careers, counsellors tend to experience ambivalence or confusion about their theoretical knowledge and how they would ideally like to be; and toward the end, they emerge experienced and self-aware counsellors, who are flexible and secure with their abilities and can identify areas for improvement (i.e., a stronger sense of professional identity is related to experience). There are also similarities between these stages and the various definitions of professional identity.

An individual's sense of professional identity is strengthened through experience as a counsellor. In this vein, Brott and Myers (1999) consider the development of professional identity as an ongoing process of maturation that continues throughout one's career. Professional roles are a key concept in counsellor development

models and in definitions of professional identity (e.g., Bruss & Kopala, 1993; Schoen, 1989; Van Riper, 1972). Bruss and Kopala (1993) postulate that the professional identity of counsellors is connected to their personal identities and needs as individuals, similar to Hogan (1964), who theorizes about an amalgamation of both method and personal style in the final stages of counsellor development.

Counsellor professional identity has been studied in many forms in the literature, particularly by means of quantitative methods (e.g., Gazzola et al., 2010; Neimeyer & Diamond, 2001; Norcross, Hedges, & Prochaska, 2002; Prochaska & Norcross, 1982). Delphi methodology has been utilized by researchers interested in predicting future developments and trends in psychotherapy in the United States (Neimeyer & Diamond, 2001; Norcross et al., 2002). Surveys and questionnaires have been utilized to study counsellor professional identity and public perceptions of counsellors (e.g., Gazzola et al., 2010; Gelso & Karl, 1974; Hosie, West, & Mackey, 1993). Qualitative methods have also been employed to measure professional counsellor identity development (e.g., Nelson & Jackson, 2003; Smith, 2007; Swickert, 1997). Many studies have focused on a heterogeneous group of counsellors that includes bachelor-level, master's-level, and doctoral-level practitioners of different educational backgrounds, and have tended to focus on counselling psychologists. Although there appears to be considerable attention paid to professional identity among counselling psychologists in the literature (e.g., Lalande, 2004; Young & Nicol, 2007), there are comparatively fewer studies dedicated to the professional identity of master's-level counsellors. Further, much of the literature in this area is either nonspecific as to the amount of clinical experience that participants have or the participants tend to be novice practitioners with only a few years of experience in the field.

In light of the legislative changes throughout Canada presently underway (Gazzola et al., 2010), it is timely to explore how a unified group of master's-level counsellors view themselves in the midst of the changing parameters of practice. This qualitative study focused on experienced counsellors with at least 10 years of practice experience, as it was anticipated that practitioners with more experience would be in a better position to address the development and changes of their professional identity over time. Experienced counsellors were also expected to have a more solid professional identity, in line with the theories of Hogan (1964), Loganbill et al. (1982), and Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003). It was hoped that a qualitative study of experienced counsellors would generate an in-depth exploration of the lived experience of their professional identities and elicit detailed narratives from interviewees (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), where participants could speak openly about the development of their professional identity over the years and discuss which factors they believe contributed to it most.

The present study addressed how experienced Canadian master's-level counsellors perceive their individual professional identity in terms of their professional roles, abilities, reputation, and overall successes as counsellors. The central research question that guided this study was "What do experienced counsellors consider to be the critical influences on their sense of professional identity?"

METHOD

We employed a semi-structured qualitative method based on several principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We chose this approach because it offered the opportunity for insightful exploration, a preliminary model that could explain counsellor professional identity, and a systematic approach to identifying themes and patterns relating to professional identity. The methodology's systematic procedures, including the constant comparison approach, were chosen to gain a conceptual understanding of the elements that contribute to the participants' professional identities rather than formulating a theory.

Participants

A sample of purpose and convenience was used in this study. We selected participants for their ability to be thoughtful reporters of their professional identities. Participants met the following criteria: (a) currently practicing as a counsellor; (b) having a master's degree from a counselling program (e.g., counselling, educational counselling, pastoral counselling, counselling psychology); and (c) having a minimum of 10 years of post-master's counselling experience. The sample for the present study was recruited via referrals from colleagues and professors in the field and interviews were conducted between the months of April and November 2009. All 9 participants worked in the same mid-sized Canadian city, and 5 out of 9 participants were women. The average age of the participants was 50 years (range = 37–61).

Post-graduation experience ranged from 10 to 24 years. Two participants worked in a high school, 1 worked in a community agency, 1 worked in a university as a personal counsellor, 2 worked in a university as career counsellors, 1 worked in a college as a personal counsellor, and 2 worked in private practice. Seven participants were members of the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA), with 6 of these having Canadian Certified Counsellor status. Further, 3 of the 7 who were members of the CCPA also had other professional memberships. All but 1 participant were members of a professional association. Seven of the participants were graduates of the same university counselling program while the other 2 were graduates of another counselling program in the same city.

Demographic Questionnaire

A brief, structured questionnaire was used to gather basic demographic data about the participants. It comprised inquiries of counsellors' age, years of counselling experience, and type of employment setting. These data were used to situate counsellors in terms of their demographic information so that possible patterns or commonalities between them could be observed. Participants completed this questionnaire prior to being interviewed.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The authors devised a semi-structured interview protocol based on expert opinions and the review of the salient professional identity themes found in the literature. Interviews were scheduled in advance at a designated time and location (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). We created a set of predetermined questions with the initial intention of guiding discussion on the topic of counsellor professional identity. Participants were encouraged to deviate from a question if an idea came to mind in keeping with the spirit of the methodology. In this vein, new interview questions for subsequent interviews emerged, based on previous participant responses. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow new viewpoints to emerge freely, where the interviewer gently directs conversation (Aira, Kauhanen, Larivaara, & Rautio, 2003).

Each participant was interviewed once by the first author. Interviews ranged from 57 to 141 minutes, with an average of 99 minutes. The interviews were audiotaped and the interviewer also took notes before, during, and immediately following each interview in order to have a complete record of any observations and of the conversation (Swickert, 1997). The interviewer also performed member checks in vivo throughout the interview by paraphrasing what the interviewee had said in order to avoid misunderstanding at the time of data analysis. Each interview was then transcribed verbatim by the first author and later verified by a research assistant.

Data Analysis

The data first underwent a process of open coding where preliminary categories were generated. This first stage yielded categories of information that grouped statements into broad ideas (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding was then employed during which the researcher interconnected the initial categories (Creswell, 1998). This involved developing an understanding of the properties of the categories and how they related to each other. The first author coded the nine interviews while the second author served as an auditor. Minor modifications were made throughout, including the creation and deletion of subcategories and re-titling some themes. All identifying information was removed from the transcript and each participant was assigned a pseudonym prior to the data analysis.

RESULTS

Key Influences on Counsellor Professional Identity

Participants described eight themes as key contributors to their individual professional identities: (a) their personal identity; (b) their personal work experiences; (c) their perceived competencies; (d) their valuing of self-directed learning, self-care, and professional development; (e) being part of a collective group; (f) their place of work; (g) the effects of time and experience; and (h) their overall positive appraisal of their career choice. Each theme will be elaborated upon separately.

Professional identity is closely tied to personal identity. All 9 participants expressed experiencing a strong interplay between their personal and professional identities. Counsellors either described that it was difficult to distinguish between the two, or that their personal identity informs who they are professionally. Participants believed that the interplay between the two was unidirectional rather than mutually influencing or circular. The following statement by Albert (age 55) illustrates the relationship between personal and professional identity: “They are connected ... I’m a caring, compassionate, empathic person. And those are qualities that I see in myself as a counsellor. I’m still that same person.”

When describing her professional identity, Toni (age 52) directly identified that her professional identity starts with who she is as a person, while all participants mentioned the large impact of their personal experiences throughout life on how they conduct their work. Personal identity was discussed by all participants as the primary form of identity one develops, while professional identity is naturally developed later on when one enters a profession. This is captured in the following statement by Cyndi (age 47):

I find professional identity and [personal] identity are really closely interrelated, so I don’t think I could have a really wobbly identity, but have a really strong, shiny professional identity.

Work experience strongly influences individual professional identity. When asked about the various influences on their professional identity, all participants cited their experiences in the field as influential. Practical experience was generally revered over further education, certification, and memberships in professional associations. For example, Toni stated:

I think the experience over time and the different experiences I’ve had allow me to feel able to present to people and to feel confident that I’m able to be there for them. I’m not afraid to go to where they’re at, not afraid of their feelings or their angst, or I’m not gonna judge them. So it makes me feel that I have capacity, that I’m capable, and that I’m professional.

A shared belief among participants was that direct practical experience, rather than counsellor education, offered more opportunity to learn by encouraging counsellors to utilize creativity and apply problem-solving skills. George (age 37) explained that the counselling profession is one where “the learning is in the doing.” Teresa (age 61) echoed these sentiments by comparing the contributions of education and experience when asked what most influences her professional identity:

I think it’s primarily the experience, the “doing” of this work, ’cause I didn’t come out of my program ... with a really clear idea of what I was—what it meant I would do ... I’m not an academic and I’m not big on theory and research. I’m very much more practical, in-the-moment ... it’s the experience that gives you confidence.

Counsellors define their professional identity in terms of their roles. They described their professional identity either in terms of their roles and responsibilities, their abilities, or who they are personally. Participants described competence in terms of the counsellor role, understanding limits of competence, acquired subject knowledge, professionalism and poise, and self-efficacy. Participants believed that the core of who they are as professionals is their perceived ability as a counsellor today. For instance, Teresa stated, “I think a lot of [my professional identity] is feeling more competent and confident.” Cyndi added, “I see myself as someone who is competent ... and ... resourceful ... I guess I see myself as ... dedicated.” George described himself as “a curious questioner who has developed a set of tools to help people find the information they already know but can’t access by themselves.”

Notably, while discussing their abilities, some participants cautioned that despite their perceived self-efficacy as counsellors, they by no means felt as though they had mastered their professional roles. However, this unassuming stance of these experienced counsellors could be considered yet another exemplary skill indicative of competency and self-awareness. Witness Stew’s (age 42) reflection, “Even though I have ... over 10 years experience ... I feel ... like I’ll never master/know everything in terms of being a therapist ... the human soul is so complex.”

Counsellors place importance on self-directed learning, self-care, and professional development. All participants had an attitude of reflective awareness and ongoing commitments to lifelong learning and to developing as professionals. Activities such as reading and watching counselling-related material, attending conferences, practicing self-care, and sharing professional experiences with colleagues were commonly cited as valuable experiences. Cyndi explained how seeking counselling for herself helped her learn, while most participants suggested that seeking supervision for their practice as well as supervising counselling interns were crucial to their learning and self-reflective practices. All participants said they continue to seek training and take counselling-related courses, usually to either learn about a particular presenting problem (e.g., eating disorders) or a particular intervention (e.g., cognitive-behavioural therapy). Wanda (age 61) described the value of professional development: “If you continue your professional development, you become aware of so much more. And that awareness helps you, I think, [to] provide a better service to other people.”

Wanda, Toni, Cyndi, and Stanley (age 44) believed that continued learning and professional development may supplement a master’s degree in the case of a counsellor who has a bachelor degree. In some cases, participants were funded by their counselling agencies to seek professional development, whereas others were not, due to their workplace’s financial constraints. Nonetheless, Teresa, who is in the latter circumstance, argued that counsellors should seek professional development, whether or not it is provided to them:

I went ... [out of town] in the spring for grief training, just because it happened to be offered there—but that was all paid for by myself and I think it’s important, and I wish we had the funds—and the director wishes that too—but

I also think it's everybody's responsibility to keep that stuff up. Just because they're not paying for it, it's no excuse not to go.

Being part of a collective group is important to counsellors' individual professional identity. Belonging to professional associations was reported as important to participants' individual professional identity. For example, being involved in counselling associations was unanimously described as important to one's professional identity, while attending conferences, seeking and giving supervision, and sharing with colleagues were considered as opportunities to connect with other professionals. Cyndi stated that representation of the profession and internal modifications of counselling associations affect her sense of professional identity. Wanda, Toni, and George asserted that how others view their profession (counsellors collectively) affects how they view themselves as professionals. Similarly, Albert and Wanda affirmed that how they represent the profession individually affects how the profession as a whole is viewed. Their attitudes are illustrated below:

When it all comes down to it, I think it's how we represent the profession, and how we speak on what we do, be it as a counsellor or therapist or as a coach, and from that, on that basis, that's where our credibility stems from. (Albert)

I identify very, very strongly to being a counsellor and to what that means. I would not want anyone to see and know me as a counsellor having personal standards that would be detrimental toward that title—that professional title ... I feel I have to live up to the service. (Wanda)

In terms of what counsellors do as a collective (rather than what they do individually), participants emphasized the importance of having a sense of unity among counsellors. In particular, they mentioned the importance of engaging in ethical, professional, and client-focused practices.

Professional identity is context bound. When asked to describe their typical working day and duties as a counsellor, participants volunteered that the counsellor's work setting is a major contributor to the specific roles the counsellor adopts, and therefore identifies with. For example, counselling agencies may offer services within a certain model or approach to help clients, and, therefore, their counsellors are expected to work from this perspective. This is reflected in Toni's statement, "For example, a social work perspective is more structural ... or context-based, which is what we do employ here, so I employ a lot of that here, because I'm in a resource agency."

Five of the six counsellors who worked in educational settings (university or high school) compared their counselling to teaching. Wanda, Teresa, George, Cyndi, and Stanley claimed that they teach "life skills," teach people "how to love themselves," and "educate" people on a variety of topics.

How a counselling setting is administered was also mentioned as an element that determines the various responsibilities that counsellors have. For example, Wanda, George, and Cyndi stated that they had to meet the demands of various people and agencies beyond clients, as their setting grouped personal and academic

counselling in the same department. The two career counsellors, George and Cyndi, described “university politics” and budgeting restrictions as responsible for universities compartmentalizing the work of mental health professionals. They cited the example of the university’s choice to distinguish between personal counselling and career counselling as being a financial concern rather than a substantive one.

Participants stated that their stance with their clientele depended on work setting. For example, they imagined that any mental health professional working in a medical setting would tend to adopt more of a medical approach to helping clients, as per the philosophy of the centre, and would tend to work with a clientele that has specific needs. Toni declared that because she works in a community centre, she sees many clients who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, live in poverty, and present with issues more directly related to personal safety, substance abuse, and other forms of abuse. Similarly, most participants described that a counsellor working in private practice might have similar roles and work philosophies to allied professionals working in private practice. Albert stated:

I think what [mental health professionals] are being asked to do, so it may be that if they work in a hospital or nonprofit organization, they may be asked to do a slightly different role than, say, a clinical counsellor in private practice. So, where they work [and] the clientele that they work with might be a little bit different. But if we were to put them all into, say, private practice, where they’re all sort of on the same playing field, that’s where I say that the work could be quite comparable.

Professional identity develops over time. Participants generally believed that their professional identities solidified over time. Professional identity was not described as a fixed concept; rather, it was affected by a multitude of factors and experiences that accumulate over time. Albert offered the following:

Well, I would only say that my identity has evolved and ... just because of my life and my life experience ... so the way I am now, compared to the way I was 15 years ago, or 10 years ago ... through maturity, through ... any wisdom that I’ve gained, knowledge I’ve gained ... I’ve been able to apply it to myself as a professional.

Teresa stated: “I think it’s changed since the beginning, and I don’t think anything’s ever completely static.” A prevalent theme in their descriptions was growth and increased clarity regarding their professional identities.

Counsellors express positive emotions about being counsellors. Participants spoke about the intrinsic benefits of working as counsellors, while others expressed pleasant surprise around some advantages they had not foreseen prior to entering the field:

I guess I feel pretty good about it. I can’t picture myself doing anything else other than helping and counselling people and ... I think it’s a calling ... it’s

not a job where you can say you're not making a difference in the world or impacting people's lives. (Stanley)

I knew that's what I wanted to do, to help other people alleviate their pain and suffering ... and so I make money out of it ... quite good money, I would say ... quality of life is so important to me, and four days a week, I'm almost semi-retired at this point. So, lots of freedom. (Stew)

Critical Events of Counsellor Professional Identity

Participants were asked to describe (a) the moment they first realized they were professional counsellors, and (b) whether they experienced a professional identity crisis in their career as a counsellor.

Counsellor professional identity begins with a critical incident. When asked to describe the moment they first realized they were professional counsellors, all participants except George were able to recount a single identifying moment. These moments were characterized by either a positive emotional experience or an external acknowledgment related to the profession, or both. Wanda and Stanley reported that they first realized they were professional counsellors when they realized that they made a difference in a client's life. Similarly, Stew described a moment with a client when he first felt "comfortable in my skin as a professional therapist." Toni described an incident in which she refused to violate a code of ethics and henceforth realized what values she "stood for" as a professional counsellor. The emotions typically associated with these events were pride, validation, relief, or a general sense of meaning or purpose:

I could probably say it was, you know, when I walked across the stage ... when I graduated and received a diploma, and realized that this was sort of the culmination of what I had set out to do. And I was very proud. (Albert)

So that was a crisis. But maybe I realized what I stood for, what values I stood for, and how I believe that there was a standard that I needed to adhere to, so ... [that's when] I knew I was a professional counsellor. (Toni)

Yeah, I think there was a moment when I was doing personal counselling and it was when a student was telling me about some of the issues she was having ... and then for her to refer to me as her therapist, or her counsellor and I remember thinking ... I am that person! (Cyndi)

Albert, Cyndi, and Sherry (age 44) described moments that concerned formal or public recognition by others. Teresa reported both a positive emotional experience and external recognition as moments that launched her career: when she successfully defended her theoretical perspective to a panel of professors prior to graduation, and when she became employed at a university.

Professional identity crises derive from personal sources. The meaning of "professional identity crisis" was described to participants as a serious sense of loss or confusion in "who you are professionally" or "what you do professionally" for a

period of time in their careers as counsellors. Wanda, Toni, Cyndi, Albert, and Stew described having experienced professional identity crises in their careers as counsellors. These included incidents where (a) their morals and professional conduct were called into question, (b) they no longer felt stimulated and challenged by their work, (c) they faced serious struggles in helping a client, and (d) they experienced extreme stress or burnout at work. In all cases, participants' identity crises shared a degree of personal stress, emptiness, and dismay. Participants went to various lengths to try to triumph over these crises, and in most cases the crises were successfully managed and overcome. In Stew's case, self-care was key:

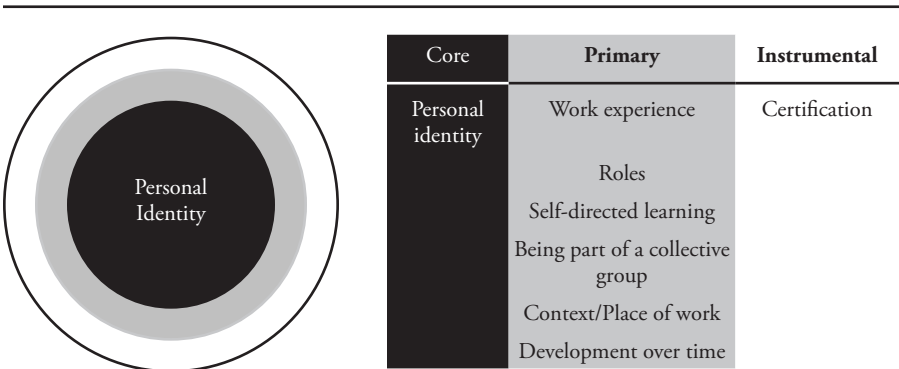
In the spring, I asked myself, oh my God ... what am I doing here? ... Whatever I was doing wasn't working ... but I was going through a tough time [personally] ... now in my forties, I respect my own limits ... it is draining, especially if you have personal stuff going on, you have to be in top shape. My energy, my *self* was down. And normally I'm in pretty good shape.

Teresa, one of the 4 participants who claimed she had never experienced a professional identity crisis, speculated that her solid personal identity entering the field may have accounted for the lack of crisis. George contended that he has always been "pretty clear" on who he was and what he did, while Stanley and Sherry simply answered "no" when asked if they had ever experienced such a crisis.

PROVISIONAL MODEL OF COUNSELLOR PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Figure 1 presents a provisional model of emerging trends in the data based on analysis of the 9 participants. The diagram is a visual representation of the degree or level of influence on professional identity. Three categorical levels are depicted: (a) the central component or core of professional identity; (b) primary influences on professional identity, which include six themes; and (c) instrumental influences on professional identity, which includes one subtheme.

Figure 1
Influences on Counsellor Professional Identity



Rings that are further away from the centre directly coincide with the level of significance to the formation of professional identity (the middle or darkest ring being the core; the most external or lightest being the least intrinsically important). Though the rings appear to be placed one inside the other (e.g., that primary influences are contained within instrumental influences), each ring or category represents an independent and separate category.

Data analysis revealed numerous influences on professional identity, but it was apparent from participants that some elements of professional identity were more salient and personally meaningful than others. We speculated that the various influences on counsellor professional identity could be considered “core,” “primary,” or “instrumental” based upon participants’ own descriptions and accounts of those elements (see Figure 1). Based on unanimous and fervent participant responses about the close bond between personal and professional identity, personal identity seemed to be the central category in the definition of participants’ professional identity. Participants described either that their professional identity begins with who they are as a person, or else that their personal identity and personal experiences over their lifetime shaped their professional selves.

The six “primary influences” were consigned as such because they were cited by all participants as crucial or intrinsically important elements to counsellors’ professional identity, or quintessential examples of it. They were described as having strong personal meaning to counsellors in defining their professional identity. Certification, on the other hand, was considered “instrumental” by participants who discussed it as being extrinsically important to their work or individual professional identity as counsellors. Although certification was not considered intrinsically important to the participants, it remained important on a practical level. Certification was perceived by the participants as an important tool that could assist them in their ability to work (i.e., to keep their job).

DISCUSSION

The results of this qualitative investigation revealed several contributors to counsellors’ professional identity, which were further categorized according to degree or level of influence. The provisional model of the influences on counsellor professional identity emerged and provided a prospective framework from which to view the professional identity of experienced counsellors. All participants described an irrevocable connection between their personal and professional identities. Bruss and Kopala (1993) agree that professional identity is a complicated phenomenon due to its inextricable link to the personal identity of the individual. Some participants denied a distinction between the two, while others attributed their strong professional identity to having a solid personal identity. The major counsellor development models by Hogan (1964), Loganbill et al. (1982), and Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003) have in common the notion of a merger of personal identity and professional identity, most apparent in the final stage of development: that of the experienced counsellor. Certainly,

participants agreed that their solid sense of identity, both personal and professional, developed over time.

Specifically, participants described learning over time to use interventions or counselling approaches that fit with their personal style or general attitudes about life and people. Counselling approaches were selected based on what the participant had become comfortable with and believed in over the years of accumulated professional and personal experience. According to Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003), increased interpersonal experiences impact counsellors strongly throughout their career. They explain that experienced counsellors learn from their direct experience with clients and from their personal lives, as there is increased integration of the professional self and the personal self. The comfortable and competent experienced professionals tended to develop congruence between their professional roles and personalities and choose interventions that suited their character. The creative application of participants' counselling practices is a result of both professional experience and personal style (Hogan, 1964).

Participants identified six factors as highly influential on their professional identity. Participants described themselves as competent, confident, and self-aware and further professed that without a strong professional identity, there would be confusion regarding their work role, boundaries with clients, and how to proceed with counselling. Brott and Myers (1999) claim that professional identity serves as a frame of reference for carrying out professional roles. Goldschmitt et al. (1981) agree that issues salient to the roles and functions of counsellors include professional activities, work settings, and client populations, which is compatible with the finding that place of work and work experience are largely responsible for shaping counsellor professional identity.

Participants discussed how being part of a collective group is a significant part of their professional identity, which is consistent with Gale and Austin's (2003) description of professional identity, including a shared identity and universal role among its members. The unanimously agreed-upon value of self-directed learning, and the belief in the influence of time on seasoned counsellors' professional identity, are presented as part of the normal professional development of counsellors, according to counsellor development models (e.g., Loganbill et al., 1982; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

Interestingly, although most participants appreciated the external value placed on certification by others, certification was generally not personally relevant to their professional identity. Whereas other workplace requirements such as professional development, membership in counselling organizations, and work experience seemed to hold strong intrinsic value among counsellors, being formally labelled as a "Canadian Certified Counsellor" did not. The reason for this could possibly be that certification per se is a relatively independent venture that does not necessitate ongoing interpersonal communication in contrast to professional development and belonging to a counselling organization. Other participants conceived that, given their already solid professional identity, which is rooted in their personal

identity, perceptions or recognition by others did little to affect how they viewed themselves. This is consistent with the notion that experienced professionals are generally satisfied with themselves and rely less upon others as they form their professional self-image and conduct their work (cf. Hogan, 1964; Loganbill et al., 1982; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

Though no formal model or theory exists to explain how counsellors develop a professional identity, results present many similarities between the progression of counsellor professional identity development and counsellor development in general. It is possible that with further investigation into this domain with additional participants and saturation of the data, an actual model of counsellor professional identity may emerge. Additional “levels” of degree of influence may also materialize.

Interestingly, while participants discussed at length the importance of several factors, such as professional development and direct counselling experience, none of them directly cited research or research-based practices as influential to their work as counsellors. Theory was not mentioned by most participants, and one participant admitted that she is “not big on theory and research,” because she does not view herself as an academic. In addition, 4 participants imagined that years of counselling experience and ongoing professional development may supplement a master’s degree for bachelor-level counselling practitioners. Although these statements do not necessarily imply that participants discount the importance of research on practice, they are consistent with Ronnestad and Skovholt’s (2003) suggestion that counsellors’ functioning is founded on accumulated wisdom and integrated knowledge.

On the other hand, independent learning, direct client contact, and creative application of interventions are certainly beneficial and exemplary preferences of experienced professionals (Hogan, 1964; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). With increased experience, there is a shift from textbook learning toward a self-directed preference for what to learn and how to learn (Pelling & Whetham, 2006; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). It is possible that, as they accumulate work experiences, counsellors rely less and less on research-driven practices and more and more on their previous experiences in their counselling practice.

LIMITATIONS

Although the study included both male and female counsellors from a variety of settings, backgrounds, and age groups, the sample size was small and was insufficient to reach saturation. Because of this limitation, the findings of this study, including the provisional model presented, should be considered as a potential foundation of an emergent theory and represent “indications” (Truell, 2001, p. 87) of important themes related to professional identity. In addition, because participants were experienced counsellors generally of the same generation, it is possible that age and experience influenced their definition and experience of professional identity.

This study was intended to inform us about the professional identity of experienced counsellors and, although we believe that the data capture the experiences of this particular group, the explanatory power of our results is limited by the fact that we did not reach saturation. In addition, novice counsellors with less counselling experience were not included. Thus, transferability of our results is limited and should not go beyond counsellors or those who meet the criteria established for this study. Further, all 9 participants were graduates of a counselling program in the same city in which they were currently employed, and 7 of the participants were from the same counselling program. Although they were at least 10 years removed from their counsellor education programs, this may also have an impact on the transferability of the findings.

Finally, this study did not directly investigate the development of counsellor professional identity, but rather the current description of participants' professional identity and retrospective accounts of its development. Although some questions invited participants to reflect upon its development and how it has evolved, limitations are inherent in the participants' memories of the accounts and this must be taken into consideration when interpreting the data.

IMPLICATIONS

This study has begun to address professional identity among master's-level counsellors and has identified some of its major components. Notably, all counsellors defined their professional identity as solid. One suggestion for promoting the development of a strong individual professional identity is for counsellor training programs to encourage counsellors-in-training to reflect upon their counsellor identities and the influences on its development through ongoing discussion or perhaps the inclusion of professional identity issues in the program's core curriculum. Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003) suggest that reflecting upon professional experiences in general are prerequisites for optimal development. This could lead to a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of oneself and others, and of how to conduct one's work.

Learning more about the factors that influence professional identity development could contribute to the advancement of counsellor education and potentially improve the quality of counsellors' professional identities. Bruss and Kopala (1993) contend that professional identity often begins in the training process, and thus recommend training programs to provide an environment that is sensitive to students' individual ideal counselling practices and beliefs and especially to promote discussion on professional identity that may orient students to a sound professional identity. A professional's personality is expressed in his or her work; thus, discussing this manifestation during training in a positive and reassuring manner can make the difference between counsellor trainees feeling reasonably assured about their personal and professional capacities, or questioning their suitability for their professional choices (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). It would also be beneficial to encourage counsellors with solid counsellor identities to openly discuss their

professional identities with other counsellors in professional group settings. This is consistent with Gazzola and Smith's (2007) advisory for more counsellors to assume leadership roles that will reinforce the profession's unique identity for the benefit of future clients, allied professionals, and counsellors themselves.

Ultimately, being able to communicate a clear counselling identity could benefit clients who will have a more accurate understanding of distinctions between allied mental health professions when deciding on seeking mental health services. Better understanding the differences between counsellors and allied professionals may guide service users toward better service and appropriate assistance. It could even lead to increased demand for service (Gazzola & Smith, 2007).

Based on the findings that a solid professional identity informs professional roles, ethical conduct, and the quality of counselling, professional identity is also of considerable importance to service users (i.e., clients). Research supports a close and reciprocal relationship between how counsellors develop and how they handle challenges and difficulties in the therapeutic relationship (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Thus, the strength of a counsellor's professional identity may positively influence the quality of counselling and the establishment of a productive working relationship with clients.

Acknowledgement

This research was part of a larger project on counselling identity that was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

References

- Aira, M., Kauhanen, J., Larivaara, P., & Rautio, P. (2003). Factors influencing inquiry about patients' alcohol consumption by primary health care physicians: qualitative semi-structured interview study. *Family Practice, 20*(3), 1-6. doi:10.1093/fampra/cm37
- Blocher, D. H., Tennyson, W. W., & Johnson, R. H. (1963). The dilemma of counselor identity. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 10*(4), 344-349. doi:10.1037/h0044274
- Brott, P. E., & Myers, J. E. (1999). Development of a professional school counselor identity: A grounded theory. *Professional School Counseling, 2*(5), 339-348.
- Bruss, K. V., & Kopala, M. (1993). Graduate school training in psychology: Its impact upon the development of professional identity. *Psychotherapy, 30*, 1-7. doi:10.1037/0033-3204.30.4.685
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. London, UK: Sage.
- DiCicco-Bloom, B., & Crabtree, B. F. (2006). The qualitative research interview. *Medical Education, 40*(4), 314-321. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2929.2006.02418.x
- Domke, J. A. (1982). Current issues in counseling psychology: Entitlement, education, and identity confusion. *Professional Psychology, 13*, 859-870. doi:10.1037//0735-7028.13.6.859
- Gale, A. U., & Austin, D. (2003). Professionalism's challenges to professional counselors' collective identity. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 81*, 3-10.
- Gazzola, N., & Smith, J. D. (2007). Who do we think we are? A survey of counsellors in Canada. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling, 29*(2), 97-110. doi: 10.1007/s10447-007-9032-y
- Gazzola, N., Smith, J. D., King-Andrews, H. L., & Kearney, M. K. (2010). Professional characteristics of Canadian counsellors: Results of a national survey. *Canadian Journal of Counselling, 44*(2), 83-99.

- Gelso, C. J., & Karl, N. J. (1974). Perceptions of "counselors" and other help-givers: What's in a label? *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 21(3), 243-247. doi:10.1037/h0036468
- Goldschmitt, M., Tipton, R. M., & Wiggins, R. C. (1981). Professional identity of counseling psychologists. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 28(2), 158-167. doi:10.1037//0022-0167.28.2.188
- Goodyear, R. K. (2000). An unwarranted escalation of counselor-counseling psychologist professional conflict: Comments on Weinrach, Lustig, Chan and Thomas (1998). *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 78, 103-106.
- Hershenson, D. B., & Power, P. W. (1987). *Mental health counselling*. New York, NY: Pergamon.
- Hiebert, B., & Uhlemann, M. R. (1993). Counselling psychology: Development, identity, and issues. In K. S. Dobson & D. J. G. Dobson (Eds.), *Professional psychology in Canada* (pp. 285-312). Cambridge, MA: Hogrefe & Huber.
- Hogan, R. A. (1964). Issues and approaches in supervision. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 1, 139-141. doi:10.1037/h0088589
- Hosie, T. W., West, J. D., & Mackey, J. A. (1993). Employment and roles of counselors in employee assistance programs. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 71, 355-359.
- Lalande, V. M. (2004). Counselling psychology: A Canadian perspective. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 17(3), 273-286. doi: 10.1080/09515070412331317576
- Loganbill, C., Hardy, E., & Delworth, U. (1982). Supervision: A conceptual model. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 10, 3-42. doi:10.1177/0011000082101002
- Mrdjenovich, A. J., & Moore, B. A. (2004). The professional identity of counselling psychologists in health care: A review and call for research. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 17, 69-79. doi: 10.1080/09515070410001665758
- Neimeyer, G. J., & Diamond, A. K. (2001). The anticipated future of counselling psychology in the United States: A Delphi poll. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 14, 49-65. doi: 10.1080/09515070110057513
- Nelson, K. W., & Jackson, S. (2003). Professional counselor identity development: A qualitative study of Hispanic student interns. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 43(1), 2-14.
- Norcross, J. C., Hedges, M., & Prochaska, J. O. (2002). The face of 2010: A Delphi poll on the future of psychotherapy. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 33(3), 316-322. doi: 10.1037//0735-7028.33.3.316
- Pelling, N. (2004). Counselling psychology: Diversity and commonalities across the Western World. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 17(3), 239-245. doi: 10.1080/09515070412331317611
- Pelling, N., & Whetham, P. (2006). The professional preparation of Australian counsellors. *International Journal of Psychology*, 41(3), 189-193. doi: 10.1080/00207590544000185
- Prochaska, J. O., & Norcross, J. C. (1982). The future of psychotherapy: A Delphi poll. *Professional Psychology*, 13(5), 620-627. doi:10.1037//0735-7028.13.5.620
- Remley, T. P. Jr., & Herlihy, B. (2005). *Ethical, legal, and professional issues in counseling* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Ronnestad, M. H., & Skovholt, T. M. (2003). The journey of the counselor and therapist: Research findings and perspectives on professional development. *Journal of Career Development*, 30, 5-44. doi: 10.1177/089484530303000102
- Schoen, L. G. (1989). In search of a professional identity: Counseling psychology in Australia. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 17(2), 332-343. doi: 10.1177/0011000089172011
- Smith, K. L. (2007). *The experiences of deaf counselors in developing their professional identity*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Union Institute & University, Cincinnati, OH.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Swickert, M. L. (1997). Perceptions regarding the professional identity of counselor education doctoral graduates in private practice: A qualitative study. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 36(4), 332-340.
- Truett, R. (2001). The stresses of learning counselling: Six recent graduates comment on their personal experience of learning counselling and what can be done to reduce associated harm. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 14(1), 67-89.

- Van Riper, B. W. (1972). Toward a separate professional identity. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 19(2), 117-120. doi:10.1037/h0032439
- VanZandt, C. E. (1990). Professionalism: A matter of personal initiative. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 68, 243-245.
- Young, R. A., & Nicol, J. J. (2007). Counselling psychology in Canada: Advancing psychology for all. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 56(1), 20-32. doi:10.1111/j.1464-0597.2007.00273.x

About the Authors

Sara Alves completed her M.A. in counselling at the University of Ottawa where she conducted research on counsellor professional identity issues. She is currently undertaking her Ph.D. studies in counselling psychology at McGill University.

Nick Gazzola is an associate professor of counselling at the University of Ottawa. His main research interests are in counselling supervision processes, counselling identity, and counsellor professional issues.

Address correspondence to Nick Gazzola, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada, K1N 6N5; e-mail <gazzola@uottawa.ca>