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Article 31

A Phenomenological Case Study: The Transition of Mental Health Counseling Interns From Students to Professionals

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As mental health counseling interns advance through their last semester of counselor education, they are confronted with the task of establishing themselves as new professionals. Counselor education literature contends that becoming a professional counselor is a complex, developmental process, not yet fully understood (Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2003; Borders, 1989; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). The developmental process has been described as beginning upon acceptance into a counselor education program, continuing through graduation, and achieving licensure (Hazler & Kottler, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Factors that contribute to counselor development have rarely been explored. Counselor educators have speculated at length about deeper developmental changes occurring within the person of the counselor; however, notably absent in the literature are descriptions of trainees' experiences during this developmental process.

Furthermore, the descriptions of interns' experiences found in counselor education literature seem to miss the final experience of students transitioning to a professional counselor. Research characterizes factors which influence the process of development for students; however, this characterization is broad in scope and does not include an extensive description of the transition from student to professional (Auxier et al., 2003; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Nelson & Jackson, 2004; Ronnestad & Skovholt 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

Counselor identity development research has produced common themes and factors that influence the process of becoming a professional (Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2003; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Nelson & Jackson, 2004; Ronnestad & Skovholt 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). For example, Nelson and Jackson (2004) conducted a qualitative study to explore counselor identity development of interns with Hispanic origin. Consistent with previous research, Nelson and Jackson noted three themes (knowledge, personal growth and experiential learning) which influence counselor identity development among interns who were not members of a specific ethnic group.

Furr and Carroll (2003) also studied counselor identity development by asking counseling interns in a master's degree program to report critical incidents that were influential in identity development. Furr and Carroll, also found that experiential learning and field experiences were the most frequently cited critical incidents. The findings of both Nelson and Jackson (2004) and Furr and Carroll provide valuable information regarding factors that contribute to identity development; yet, these studies do not specifically address the experiences of last semester interns. Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) briefly address this final transition in their longitudinal study of counselors at varying stages of development from beginning student to the advanced practitioner. Originally, the study produced over 20 themes regarding counselor development (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992) which have since been condensed into 14 themes (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). The research produced a model of counselor development that describes six phases of development, from the pre-training stage to the senior professional phase.

The third phase, the advanced student, describes the intern's experiences at the end of training (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Ronnestad and Skovholt describe this phase as a time when self-imposed pressure to be perfect is high, and consequently the self-imposed pressure often manifests as lack of spontaneity in counseling. Interns are burdened with excessive responsibility and gauge their development by external standards. For example, advanced students recognize their development when they compare themselves to beginning students; however, the advanced student feels insecure when comparing their development to advanced practitioners. This phase is characterized by a continual need for feedback from peers and those viewed as more advanced in the field. Such research provides some understanding of counseling interns' experiences during their final semester of counselor education, yet, the broad focus of the study precludes a more detailed description of any experiences specific to this time period.

Hazler and Kottler (2005), characterize the transition to professional counselor as a time when numerous changes are taking place. New employment brings not only potential geographic changes and increased income, but changes in responsibility and expectations for counseling interns. Such changes in professional identity include showing initiative and autonomy rather than looking for direction and approval from others with regard to counseling responsibilities and skill. The authors noted transitioning between school and professional life may result in significant grief for students. While these descriptions are in keeping with much of the research described by Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003), Hazler and Kottler note their observations are culled from decades of combined experience as counselor educators. These observations are neither research-based nor gathered from counseling interns themselves.

Therefore, there is little research in counselor education that characterizes the experiences of mental health counseling interns as they begin the transition to professional counselors. Research in this area potentially prepares students and counselor educators for issues and challenges that may emerge during this time of transition; therefore, this study explored the experiences of the students transitioning to professional counselors.

Method

To explore this transition, a phenomenological case study was utilized. The purpose of phenomenological research is to gain an accurate understanding of another's experience, to capture in-depth reflections by participants regarding their experience of an identified phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). A case study explores a phenomenon through one or more cases within a circumscribed setting or context. Therefore, this study utilized a phenomenological case study to explore the following phenomenon: the experiences of mental health counseling interns during the last semester of internship as they transition to professional counselor.

Sample

Participants for this study were asked to participate based upon two criteria: 1) They needed to be a mental health intern in their final semester of graduate school, and 2) They needed to be able to articulate the experience of being in the final semester of internship as a mental health counseling student. Based upon these two criteria, two female students and one male student self selected to be a participant in this phenomenological case study. All three of the participants were white, European-Americans. Two of the participants were in their mid-twenties and not married, while one participant was in her early thirties and married.

Data Collection

Data was collected using 6 semi-structured interviews during a period of five months. Prior to data collection, the study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. The questions used to guide the interviews were: a) Now that you are in your last semester of school, what are your thoughts and feelings? b) What does it mean to you as you begin the transition from a student to a counselor? c) What experiences have contributed to your sense of identity as a counselor?

All participants were interviewed in person with each interview lasting approximately 90 minutes. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. In addition to the semi-structured interview, the primary researcher kept a journal throughout data collection, noting affect responses during the interviews, thoughts about emerging themes connecting participants' experiences, as well as additional observations from reading or the researcher's own experiences that may have been related to the study.

Data Analysis

When conducting phenomenological research, data collection and analysis inform each other in a process that includes questioning, reflecting, and interpreting. The researchers used Van Manen's (1990) approach to phenomenological data analysis uses a line-by-line approach to thematic analysis of the transcripts examining every single sentence or sentence cluster to uncover the experience being described by participants.

Validity

According to Maxwell (1996), the key to validity, with regard to qualitative interpretation, pertains to possible threats to the researcher's interpretations of the phenomenon. Qualitative validity is much different than the quantitative guarantee of

validity which posits that validity can be obtained through a set of logical procedures. Qualitative researchers view validity as a relative term that is a goal, not a guaranteed result (Maxwell, 1996). Using Van Manen's (1990) approach to phenomenology does not call for the researcher to take a scientific, removed approach to research. In fact Van Manen states, "To establish a strong relation with a certain question, phenomenon, or notion, the researcher cannot afford to adopt an attitude of so-called scientific disinterestedness" (p. 33). The researchers took three steps to ensure trustworthiness and accuracy: member checks, peer review, and researcher memos.

The purpose of the member check interview was to aid in clarifying miscommunications in the interview, therefore ensuring that the themes accurately represent the experiences of the participants as last semester interns transitioning to professional counselors (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this research study, the member check confirmed that the themes identified by the researcher accurately described participants' experiences of the phenomena in question. The second method was peer review. The second author of this study served as a peer reviewer. The peer reviewer ensured through an external check of the research that the researcher is being rigorous in the data analysis (Creswell, 2007). Finally, researcher memos enabled the researcher to clarify any bias that may exist that would inhibit the research process.

Results

One main theme and three sub-themes emerged in the data. The main theme that emerged, *professionalism*, described the dynamic nature of the transition of student to professional as participants articulated a changing self-identification with student and counselor roles. Three sub-themes emerged within this main theme: *shaping the professional*, *practicing professionalism*, and *emerging professional*. These subthemes describe influential factors that contributed to the changing self-identification with the student and counselor roles.

Professionalism

Through the course of data analysis, the theme *professionalism* emerged in participants' described experiences as last semester, mental health counseling interns. *Professionalism* describes students' changing identification with the role of student to professional counselor. The main theme also describes a transition toward increased professional knowledge, behavior, and attitudes, as well as an internalization of the role of counselor.

The notion of *professionalism*, being perceived as a professional, seeing oneself as a working, effective member of the counseling profession, seemed to have increasingly salient meanings for interns in the final semester of graduate school. Participants were distinctly aware that they were still students; however, each participant described feeling more like a professional during the second semester of internship and experienced a moving away from the student role. Participants described an increasing awareness regarding their own sense of what it meant to be a member of the counseling profession. One participant stated,

I think who I am and who the counselor is, is the same person. It's just that I am me first, then the counselor. I don't think I put on a different hat. I think I am me. I think there is just a little bit more professionalism in there.

Another participant noted, "I feel more in my skin as a counselor the second semester than the first semester". Another participant stated, "I think I would identify myself more as a practitioner now or being an intern than a student. Granted I do both, but I feel more of the professional role than the student role right now."

The significance of becoming a member of a profession appears to have significant meaning in the second semester of internship as participants identified less with the student role and more with the role of professional counselor. In addition, participants described role confusion as they began to identify more with being a professional counselor at their internship sites, yet still maintained their student status at school.

Shaping the professional. This emerged as a sub-theme as participants described influential individuals and activities they perceived as shaping their professional identities. *Shaping the professional* is a description of persons and experiences that impacted participants' perceptions and understanding of themselves as new professionals. For example, participants described professors, fellow students, clients and site supervisors, as well as personal reading, classroom experiences and personal counseling as influential in shaping identity.

Participants spoke of relationships with graduate professors and fellow classmates as factors that impacted their professional identities. Important interactions included receiving feedback from professors and classmates, and hearing the viewpoints and experiences of professors and classmates during class. In addition, participants indicated that experiences with clients helped them understand the role of a professional counselor. Also noted, was the impact of internship site supervisors in easing the transition from student to professional counselor. Important activities indicated were feedback from supervisors, willingness to provide needed information, as well as a willingness to teach and model for interns. One participant stated about his site supervisor, "I think the fact that she is such a good supervisor has helped me to become more confident in my practice."

In addition to influential individuals, participants described activities as helpful in shaping professional identity. For example, personal reading was central to *shaping* professional identity. Books were instrumental in the process of discerning what counseling theories fit for each participant, as well as supplementing classroom information. One participant stated, "I think what I supplemented in made me a stronger student and I think at some levels, it has made me a stronger counselor."

Participants also indicated that classroom experiences contributed to further identification with the role of counselor in two ways: experiential learning and the internal processing as a result of the experience. One participant described how it felt being in her basic skills course experiencing what it is like to be in the counselor role, "I felt like a counselor. I felt like this is really what I want to do..." During those classroom experiences, the participant could see herself in the professional role of counselor. The

internal processing that resulted from classroom discussions and experiential activities also helped participants further identify with the role of counselor.

Shaping the professional is a description of influential individuals and activities that participants perceived as shaping who they had become or were becoming as professionals. Participants described multiple influences that were impactful in shaping their professional identity. Some of these influences were the result of formal training activities like classes and internship. Other influences were more informal like personal reading and personal counseling.

Practicing professionalism. This emerged as a second sub-theme describing a developing professional attitude that, at times, translated into tangible behaviors or activities. Participants described an awareness regarding behavior and appearance at internship sites and an increasing professional awareness regarding the need to practice self-directed behaviors as the separation from the academic community began. It seemed that this heightened professional awareness stemmed from a belief that to become a professional required *practice*. One participant noted, “I have to watch the way that I am conducting myself because I am more visible now. I am cautious as to what I am seen doing and what I am heard saying.” Participants also described increased self-directed behaviors as an important part of *practicing professionalism*. The notion of self-directed behaviors is particularly salient as it is a representation of students taking ownership of their professional development. During their final semester, these mental health interns typically spent most of the work week at their internship sites rather than the university setting. As a result of the physical and intellectual distancing from the academic world, students found it increasingly important to practice self-directed activities. One participant described how joining the American Counseling Association (ACA) and subscribing to professional journals increased feeling like a professional. Another participant described feeling like a professional when she was required to get liability insurance. Once participant described new excitement in practicing self-directed learning,

I am excited that there are so many doors open to me such as books that I have come across or authors that I have sought out. It is much more self-directed; and maybe that is why I am more excited about it.

Another self-directed behavior noted by participants was self-care. During the last semester of internship, participants acknowledged that self care had been much easier to practice in their first semester of internship, and a realization occurred that self care must become a self-directed behavior with the impending transition to professional.

Finally, participants also described *practicing professionalism* in terms of a developing theory base and the increasing ability to put the theory into practice when working with clients at their internship sites. One participant stated,

“My counseling theory, I really have kind of like narrowed it down. I have started shaping how I see client problems and issues around theory that I am interested in. ...I’m just happy having a nice solid base to stand on when I am in session with a client.”

Practicing professionalism can be described as trying on or rehearsing a professional attitude that is, itself, developing. In the final semester, students realize that behaviors deemed important to a developing professional self must become more self-directed. Also noted by participants was an increasing separation in the second semester from the academic world, as students begin to shed the role of student and practice what it means to be a professional.

Emerging professional. This is a description of the thoughts and feelings experienced as graduation became more imminent. Participants acknowledged a continuum of feelings from excitement about school ending to sadness about the loss of a support network. Often these feelings were described as contradictory. For example, participants described feeling excitement about finally being able to do what they went to school for, and a sense of anxiety regarding the details of what is required of them to be licensed and find employment. One participant described *emerging professional* as a balance,

...so there are so many fears, concerns, and worries, yet so much excitement and joy and pride that kind of work for each other. It's a nice balance. I don't feel overwhelmed by either one... I do still have some feelings of, maybe, competence you know wondering if 'can I do this?', 'I think I can.' I'm building that confidence that is really something I am going to have to work on for a long time. Knowing that what I have been trained to do in, what progress people have seen in me is really true and I am capable, but yet I still have to work at it.

Another participant also described the contradictory feelings surrounding the excitement and the legalities of getting licensure,

I'm kind of joyful. You know, I wanted this career change, I'm near the end of it, and my anxiety is about finding a job. What I need to do to get the legal status of paperwork completed so that I can start towards my LPC license.

In addition to excitement and fear, a sense of loss was described in the theme *emerging professional*. For example, one participant described a sense of loss and frustration regarding the type of employment available after graduation, "...it is more or less a two year thing to get my license and then I can see myself quitting to find the job that I really want, but I can't get the job that I want right away because I am not licensed." Another participant described a sense of loss regarding a support system and stated, "...I think I am scared because I don't really...I don't have a lot of support out of school. ...wondering who will fill their spot and who won't and if I will?"

Emerging professional is a description of the feelings that emerged for participants as graduation was getting closer and their thoughts became more future oriented focused on securing employment, licensure, and re-establishing support networks. This theme also captures the continuum of emotions from excitement to sadness experienced by participants during the final semester of internship.

Discussion and Recommendations for Counselor Education

Professionalism was the central theme found in this study, in addition to three sub-themes: *shaping the professional*, *practicing professionalism*, and *emerging professional*. During the final semester of internship, participants described feeling more like professional counselors than students. An increasing awareness of their role as a professional counselor was particularly salient during the final semester and emerged in the three sub-themes. This finding is in keeping with the research of Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) who found that to become a counselor is a journey to integrate personal self and professional self. Participants described that during the final semester of internship an internalization of the role of counselor was occurring.

A critical aspect of professional training is supervision (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004). One of the functions of supervision is to cultivate professional growth in supervisees (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004). Given this, encouraging students in both individual and group supervision to share their experiences and thoughts regarding professional development seems appropriate. The participants in this study described the second semester as being more impactful in the integration of personal and professional self. Engaging in conversations with students regarding their professional development at earlier stages could potentially increase student awareness of professional identity, thus helping them balance skill development and professional development.

Counseling research indicates that relationships have great significance in terms of counselor identity development (Cormier, 1988; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). These research findings are consistent with the findings of this study, as the participants of this study described relationships with professors, classmates, clients, and site supervisors as crucial to shaping professional identity. Participants noted that feedback from professors, peers and site supervisors was an important aspect of this relationship. Counselor education is a field that is characterized by relationships. Some of these relationships are formal and some are informal (Black, Suarez, & Medina, 2004). Informal relationships in the form of mentoring have significant impact upon students in regard to professional development. In an article regarding strategies for mentoring students Black, Suarez and Medina (2004) recommend that counselor education programs establish specific procedures for developing mentoring relationships with students, and encourage faculty members to enter into mentoring relationships with their students. Counselor education programs may want to look at ways to encourage this type of mentoring for students with site supervisors.

Participants in this study described that there were activities such as self-directed reading that were impactful. There appears to be little literature on the role of self-directed, student-identified supplemental readings in counselor education. Counselor education programs could encourage personal reading among students by providing summer reading lists when the workload for students is typically less. Deciding what to read poses a daunting task for some students with the variety of subjects available in the counseling field, so providing a reading list may be a starting point.

Experiential learning is a common influential theme found in counselor identity research (Auxier et al., 2003; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Nelson & Jackson, 2003). In this study experiential learning experiences contributed to shaping professional identity development as students gained a deeper understanding of self, as well as a deeper

appreciation for the professional self. These findings further support the role of experiential learning as an important component in counselor education, and suggest that counselor educators should continue to use experiential learning activities to enhance professional identity development in students. The results of this study extend the findings of Furr and Carroll (2003) and the importance of experiential activities and increased understanding of self. The question in counselor education is whether or not experiential activities such as high-ropes courses, team building exercises, growth groups, or personal counseling should be required or encouraged. It would seem that based on the results of this study and the results of the Furr and Carroll study that there may be significant merit in requiring students to engage in experiential activities that are specifically aimed at increasing awareness.

Finally, personal counseling was identified by participants as an influential factor in shaping counselor identity. Fouad and Hains (2007) conducted a study exploring student support of required personal counseling in counselor education programs and found that students were aware that personal issues have the potential to interfere with effective counseling. However, results indicate that just over half of the students participating in the study felt that personal counseling should be a requirement of counselor education programs. Self awareness is an important aspect of counselor development and at the very least strongly encouraging personal counseling in graduate programs may benefit professional development of students.

Practicing professionalism describes a developing professional attitude that at times translates into tangible behaviors or activities. While counseling research speaks of the importance of experiential learning and internship experiences, there is limited discussion regarding the aspect of *practicing professionalism*. In counseling literature, Hazler and Kottler (2005) describe their own experience as educators encouraging students to begin viewing themselves and acting like professionals. One way in which they encouraged their students to do this was by joining professional organizations. One participant in this study spoke of the importance of membership in professional organizations, the other participants described a heightened professional awareness regarding behavior and appearance at internship sites. Also described was an increasing professional awareness regarding self-directed behaviors as students separated themselves from the academic world. Results of this study suggest that students are aware that becoming a professional is not an event that happens overnight, but a process that takes practice. In light of this finding, if counselor educators frame participating in professional organizations and attending professional conferences as “practicing professionalism,” it may result in more student involvement. There is also a financial aspect of professional membership and conferences; however, if students understand what these types of activities will do to advance their career and more importantly their professional development then they may be more likely to get involved.

Emerging professional speaks to the thoughts and feelings that students expressed regarding the future outside of school. This emergent theme is in keeping with counseling identity literature in which Hazler and Kottler (2005) characterize the transition from graduate school to a first professional job as a time when numerous changes are taking place. Hazler and Kottler go on to describe leaving graduate school to grieving a loss. This is consistent with the findings of this study in which participants spoke of losing a support network. The relationships that participants characterized as shaping their

professional identities are also the ones in which participants are grieving. One aspect that continually appears in counseling literature that seems to aid students in making the transition to professional is the mentoring relationship spoken of earlier with regard to the theme *shaping the professional* (Cormier, 1988, Hazler & Kottler, 2005; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

Conclusion

Ideally this study will inspire discussion and more research regarding the concept of professional transitions in counselor education programs. Research is needed that speaks to the students' experiences surrounding the crucial transition from student to professional counselor. Greater knowledge regarding this transition could assist counselor educators in understanding the practices or experiences that help students successfully navigate the transition from student to professional. As educators and supervisors the goal is not only to teach and provide students with the skill, knowledge, and expertise to become an employed professional counselor, but to assist students in integrating their personal self with the professional self to transition smoothly and successfully to a practicing counselor (Hazler & Kottler, 2005).

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