

**My Counselor Identity**

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As a counselor and therapist, it is important to have a comprehensive understanding of your identity, including how it affects your approach to providing therapy services and also how it affects your relationships with your clients. Identities are complex and dynamic, which is why it is important to regularly check in with and understand your own identity. This paper identifies and reflects on my own identity as a professional helper and therapist.

## **My Path to Becoming a Professional Helper**

Throughout my life, I have transitioned from the role of unofficial or casual helper to the role of professional helper. A professional helper is someone who is employed to assist the recipient(s) in finding solutions to various life challenges. Such life challenges can include overcoming a recent change, a transition to a new stage of life, assistance with finding basic needs such as food or housing or employment, or managing behaviors and emotions, just to name a few. A professional helper receives specific extensive training in order to develop the skills necessary to lead or assist the recipient in finding solutions. A professional helper most often works directly with the recipient and those around the recipient, which could include family, friends, and other service providers, to find the most expedient and successful solution.

As a creative arts therapist, I am often asked when I first knew that I wanted to be a therapist. I prefer to recall my earliest memory of being an unofficial therapist. For my entire childhood, I remember that my mother was a slower walker and my father always walked much faster. As a young girl around the age of 6 or 7 years old, instead of choosing or being told to walk with one parent, I would run back and forth in between the two, spending a few minutes with my mother and then running to catch up with my father to spend a few minutes with him.

Of course, I know that this is not the role of the therapist. However, I do consider it my first role as a helper.

Growing up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, I saw first hand the gross disparity between the haves and the have-nots. Milwaukee is one of the most segregated cities in the country (Cheng, 2022, para. 1). Attending the Milwaukee Public School system helped me understand how socioeconomic status directly affects access to so many systems of care, health care included. I was able to see how growing up in a white middle class family provided me with access, supports, and opportunities that were not readily available to my black and brown peers. With this experience and knowledge as a young kid, I knew that I wanted to dedicate my professional career to trying to achieve equal access to necessary care and services.

Once I had identified that I wanted to work within some form of social justice, I began to think more about how to do so. As a teenager, I worked some nights and weekends as a babysitter. Not only was I passionate about working with kids, but I was good at it! I began taking summer and weekend jobs at day programs for kids and adults with disabilities, art camps for kids, and non-profit jobs working with underserved youth. It became clear that I had both the talent and passion for working as a professional helper.

Around age 18, I met my future mentor, Lori Vance. Lori, who is my close friend's mother, was a Creative Arts Therapist at the time and ran an after school non-profit organization for kids. Lori allowed me to intern at her organization and spent many afternoons discussing the therapy and non-profit sectors with me. My experiences with Lori led me to my decision to become a mental health therapist.

## **Attributes of a Counselor**

There are many attributes and behaviors that a therapist should and should not exhibit during a therapy session.

### **Favorable Attributes of a Counselor**

Firstly, a therapist should always utilize active listening. It is important that the client feel heard and, when possible, understood. Active listening includes making eye contact, nodding, asking clarifying questions, reflecting, and not interrupting (Neukrug, 2015, pp. 147-151). When I am listening to my client and I think of questions, I try to wait until they are done talking or telling their story to ask my questions. Often, if I wait until they are done telling the story, they have answered the question that I might have! This leads to my second important behavior, which is minimizing interruptions. Minimizing interruptions is often a subtle but important skill to practice. As a therapist, I am often eager to learn and better understand the challenges that my clients are facing so that I can help as best I can. When a client is talking, I think of follow-up questions that I want to ask. However, allowing the client to continue speaking instead of interrupting with these questions often leads to them answering most of the follow-up questions I had. Additionally, not interrupting helps the client understand that what they are saying is valued and important. Many clients seek therapy because they are experiencing low self-esteem and low self-worth. Utilizing active listening skills along with not interrupting the client can in itself help the client feel heard, validated, and worthy (Neukrug, 2015, p. 150). Finally, the third behavior a therapist should exhibit during a therapy session is to create, focus on, and review treatment goals and progress. Clients seek therapy because they are struggling with some type of life challenge. As a therapist, we have the skills to help them identify, express, and process these challenges in a focused manner. Helping a client create treatment goals can help them better

acknowledge and understand the challenges they are facing as well as better recognize when they are making progress.

### **Unfavorable Attributes of a Counselor**

There are also many behaviors that a therapist should not engage in during a therapy session. Firstly, a therapist should not engage in a non-professional relationship with the client. While this may seem obvious, there are many small behaviors and interactions that can be unprofessional and lead to unclear boundaries. For example, sharing overly personal information that does not have therapeutic benefit to the client is unprofessional and can be detrimental to treatment. Using overly casual language can also be unprofessional and lead to unclear boundaries. Secondly, a therapist should not make any assumptions about a client. As a client in therapy, it is their right and responsibility to be able to share their own unique story, experiences, and analyses. Making assumptions about a client not only can be disrespectful, but it takes away their opportunity to share their story and can also lead to incorrect treatment. Finally, a therapist should not try to rush therapy. An important part of therapy is building the therapeutic relationship. This is a necessary step in therapy, as it allows the client to build trust with the therapist. Without trust, the client likely will not be able to be open and honest with the therapist and will likely be resistant to many of the therapeutic steps.

### **My Strengths and Barriers as a Therapist**

In my experience as a therapist, I have many strengths and challenges that I continue to find, explore, and work on.

#### **My Strengths**

Some of my strengths as a therapist are being able to connect with my client and being able to provide a safe space for them. In my experience, above many different aspects and qualities of therapy, one of the most important for a client is feeling connected to their therapist. There are many behaviors and actions that I take to ensure my client feels connected to me in therapy. I have worked hard to build confidence in my practice so that I present as genuine. Being genuine allows clients to feel they can trust you. I also make a distinct effort to help my client feel accepted or that I won't judge them; this also assists in helping my client feel more connected to me so that they can be open in sharing their trauma and also in receiving support.

Creating a safe space for my client is my second strength in therapy. There are many aspects of creating a safe space in therapy, some of which include having a calm and approachable demeanor, setting clear boundaries and routines so that the client knows what to expect, and providing validation of the client's experiences and feelings. Creating a safe space is important as it allows the client to be more vulnerable, honest, and self-reflective. These are important tools in the client being able to reach their therapeutic goals.

### **My Barriers**

Some of my personal barriers to providing quality therapy services include being very talkative and being prideful. Since I was a child, I have gotten in trouble for being too talkative. In elementary school, I received great grades on my report cards but always had a comment about how I was talking too much in class. While this attribute can contribute to my ability to connect with others, it can also cause me to talk more and listen less, which is detrimental to therapy. As noted earlier, minimizing interruptions is an important therapeutic skill that I continue to work on daily. Another personal barrier that could hinder my ability to provide therapy is being prideful. My pride has sometimes led to me becoming overly defensive in

conversations that did not warrant or benefit from defensiveness. When working with challenging clients, they may intentionally or accidentally say things that are offensive or disrespectful. Responding in an open and calm manner can help you to better understand their perspective and experience while also modeling healthy communication. However, responding with pride and defensiveness will more often than not encourage the client to also be defensive and result in alienating them and driving them away from therapy. While I struggle with defensiveness in my personal life, I have been able to set my pride aside in therapy sessions and take a more empathetic approach.

### **Different Client Populations**

As a therapist working in the mental health field for roughly 8 years, I have worked primarily with underserved youth and families. These experiences have allowed me to figure out my preferred population to work with as well as those that I am most successful with.

### **My Employment History**

My first position as a therapist was in a Florida Juvenile Detention Center for youth with minor intellectual disabilities. My second employment was for two years with a non-profit organization that provided mental health services to low-income children in the school and home setting. After that, I moved to New York City and worked at a family shelter for victims of domestic violence with the dual role of Clinical Art Therapist and Children's Services Supervisor. I held this position for 3 years. Finally, I have held numerous positions and worked my way up at my current employer, which is a medium-size non-profit organization for children and families. I currently run our out-patient mental health clinic for underserved and low-income children and families.

## **My Preferred Client Population**

As previously discussed, growing up in Milwaukee provided me with a unique lens of how inequity and inequality affected my city and very directly my peers. From a young age, I had decided that I wanted to work on bridging those gaps. Because of this, I was drawn towards working with underserved populations. Throughout my educational and professional career, I have maintained this drive and passion. While all of my professional positions have involved working with underserved populations, I have been most drawn towards working with youth and families, particularly teens who have experienced trauma. My current position serves children from ages zero to 21. However, I find that I am more passionate about and more successful with older children who have the capacity to process their experiences in a more direct way. While I still utilize play and art therapy activities with older youth, they are often more willing and able to name and process their experience and trauma in a more complex way.

I am also very drawn towards working within the family unit. In my first professional position, I worked with kids in the school and home setting. I noticed very quickly that the clients who I saw in the school rather than the home did not reach their therapeutic goals nearly as often as the clients who I saw in the home. I believe a huge contributor to this was the fact that parents were not able to be involved in the school setting, but were often very involved in the home setting.

When working with children and youth, involving the parent or caregiver is almost always imperative. While important therapeutic work can be done individually with a child, it cannot be upheld, reiterated, and accepted without the involvement of the parent. For this reason, I have become very passionate about working with the entire family unit. The participation of the entire family unit allows for more processing and comprehension, and for real change to occur.

For these reasons, my preferred client population to work with is underserved youth and their families

## **Self Care**

Working as a therapist and taking care of others is a mentally trying profession. While it is fulfilling to work in a profession that helps others, it is also exhausting and stressful. Being able to work in the helping field long term requires that the professional be acutely aware of and tend to their own selves in a variety of ways. Utilizing self care often is crucial for the helping professional to be able to continue to function at a high capacity in their role.

### **Physical Self Care**

Self care can come in many forms. It is helpful to break self care into two larger groups: physical self care and mental or emotional self care. Physical self care includes tasks or activities that allow for physical exertion. This can include going on walks, running, playing sports, going to the gym, and doing yoga, to name a few. Physical self care is important to maintain both a healthy body and mind. “Exercise reduces levels of the body's stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol. It also stimulates the production of endorphins, chemicals in the brain that are the body's natural painkillers and mood elevators,” writes Harvard Health Publishing (2020) according to Harvard Health. Because mental stress can create physical symptoms, it is important to tend to both the physical and mental aspects of stress.

Physical self care also looks like taking care of your body by going to the doctor regularly. Professional helpers sometimes have a tendency to put others before themselves. This can lead to the professional not seeking professional help when they need it, such as when they

are physically sick or are experiencing pain. Going to the doctor and getting appropriate physical health care is a vital part of self care.

As a professional helper and therapist, I prioritize taking care of my body. My stress often manifests as back pain. Because of this, I prioritize working out two to three times weekly. I find that, when I work out regularly, I have more energy, more patience, and a more positive affect.

### **Mental and Emotional Self Care**

Mental self care is of equal importance. Mental and emotional self care looks like the professional attending their own mental health therapy, engaging in enjoyable and safe social activities with friends and families, meditation, having relaxing down time, and having outlets or hobbies such as reading, knitting, or cooking.

My mental self care is very important. It allows me to reset my focus and direction, and allows me to feel productive in different ways other than professionally. I am currently working on meditating daily, and being kind and forgiving to myself when I do not meet that goal. I also enjoy painting and playing with my dog, Sol. I find that painting and spending time with Sol make me feel relaxed, proud, and content.

### **Conclusion**

Working in the helping profession is an admirable and difficult choice. It requires consistent self-analysis and reflection on my identity as a counselor. There are many aspects that contribute to my counselor identity, including my upbringing, my strengths and challenges, and my passions. I recognize and study the skills needed to be a therapist, and work daily toward

integrating those skills into my own practice. I have been able to become a more confident and successful therapist by identifying and leaning into my personal counselor identity.

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