

Counselor Identity Formation: A Faith-Based Perspective

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Professional identity can be defined as the integration of the personal and professional selves. (Thacker & Diambra, 2019) In the context of a professional counseling identity, this identity is developed as the counselor has clinical experiences, completes academic coursework, meets with colleagues and other professionals in their field, and receives supervision.

Dr. Elizabeth Mellin, an associate professor in the Department of Educational Psychology, Counseling and Special Education at Pennsylvania State University, emphasizes the pursuit of professional identity in her Introduction to Counseling and Human Development class. She posits that in order to build a solid professional identity as a counselor, a counselor in training must review the ACA Code of Ethics, understand the history of their profession, and educate themselves on the profession's scope of practice. (Shallcross, 2013)

From a historical perspective, licensed professional counseling is new to the helping professions compared to the fields of psychology and social work. Social work caters to the areas of law and public policy, psychology stands out in terms of endorsing a medical model (illness model) and evidence-based practices. The field of counseling has a unique emphasis on multiculturalism, wellness, cultural competency, and career counseling. (Shallcross, 2013) Still unfolding state by state are the field's relationship to DSM diagnoses, clinical assessment, and proximity to the field of professional coaching.

From an explicitly Christian perspective, the counseling profession has a unique ability to partner with the Holy Spirit in promoting morality and restraining sin. (McMartin, 2015) Furthermore, the counseling profession can aid in developing healthy and thriving humans by halting dysfunctional ways of thinking and behaving. Because all human beings have inherent worth, all human beings deserve a chance to be the best they can be, or be in a thriving state of self-actualization. (Morrison, 2023)

Ultimately, all counselors come to their own personal definitions of counseling and maintain strategies for their own wellness and self-care as they practice counseling and engage with their professional community. In doing so, counselors build a competent and confident professional sense of self.

Dr. Donna Gibson established a professional identity model for counselors in training that illustrates the development of professional identity as a continuous process that balances the need for autonomy with the need for dependence. (Gibson et al., 2010)

Dr. Gibson's model has three main parts; discovering a personal definition of counseling, developing an overarching sense of identity, and taking responsibility for professional development. As the counselor in the training receives constructive feedback via colleagues, supervision, and coursework, the feedback is compared with previous knowledge and accepted or rejected. This is a continuous process that brings the counselor in training to a place of self-validation rather than external validation as they become more confident with the rules, standards, and expectations of the counseling profession. (Gibson et al., 2010)

As a Christian, the inerrancy of scripture informs my personal identity, and that flows into my professional identity. Because I am a Christian, I am loved and chosen by God, I have access to God's peace to guard my heart and mind, I can boldly and confidently access God through my faith in Christ, I am blameless before God, and I am forgiven and redeemed (Ephesians 1:4, Ephesians 1:7, Ephesians 3:12, Philippians 4:7, Colossians 3:12). These truths allow me to be less ruled by my own painful experiences and more able to be present with what the Holy Spirit is doing in my life and in the lives of others. My race, gender, culture, and life experiences also inform my professional identity. I'm a Caribbean-American wife, mother, postpartum depression survivor, and postpartum preeclampsia survivor. I am also

Hard-of-Hearing and wear hearing aids. As a Christian, I know that through Christ and only Christ, sin and death, killing and destruction, are but a breath. I am excited to be among a generation of culturally competent counselors who are dedicated to clients' holistic health and wellness regardless of religion, gender presentation, race, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status.

Women of color are uniquely and profoundly affected by the stress of fast-paced metropolitan living and various systemic issues. The ancient mystic practices of meditation and somatic therapies can aid in the reintegration of body and mind in the midst of these stressors.

As a counselor in training starting an internship in the next month, I see myself taking a holistic approach to women's wellness by incorporating spiritual practices such as prayer, and mindfulness-based therapeutic modalities like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Behavioral Therapy into sessions. I will also draw upon the physical postures of Yoga and breathwork. Lastly, I'd incorporate what I've learned about how food affects thought from my health coaching experience and certification with the Institute for Integrative Nutrition.

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