

Professional and Personal

Counselor Identity

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The American Counseling Association (ACA) spells out the basics of who a counselor is: a facilitator of growth and development, one who fosters a client's interest and welfare, and a promoter of healthy relationship forming. The counselor is specifically present for the client. The trust, confidence, and respect which undergirds the relationship, making possible the goals or needs of the client. The ACA definition of a counselor is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals.

A professional counselor identity that has been gradually formed over the past fifty years. This definition distinguishes the counseling profession from other related professions of psychotherapy, marriage and family therapists, licensed counseling social workers, and others. For license mental health and licensed professional counseling to grow, there must be common language and objectives in order to aid not only the billing process, licensing and common regulations, but to aid the public in selecting the appropriate mental health care. Just as physicians specialize in various areas, types, and processes of the body, counselors have a wide range of clientele they focus on working with though it is limited by the severity of need or mental health. The counseling profession through the ACA, Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP), and the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) have promoted this unified definition of counseling above and defined what it is that student counselors need to learn on their path toward licensure. These counseling bodies have determined the following as the elements of counselor identity: professional counseling orientation and ethical practice, social and cultural diversity, human growth and development, career development, counseling and helping relationships, group counseling and group work, assessment and testing, research and program evaluation. Training in these areas are included in

all accredited professional counselor program and this core curriculum of education can be seen across every state in the United States, the district of Columbia and Puerto Rico. (Burns and Cruikshanks, 2017).

Why these particular elements? Again, the purpose is to unite, facilitate growth of the profession, and ultimately, protect and serve the client. Professional counseling orientation and ethics is key to developing individuals to a level of consistency and competency that they are less likely to cause harm to a client. By completing a systematized training program licensure a candidate's code of ethics can be infused with the principles of autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, fidelity, and veracity (2014, ACA). These words are not just for the purpose of illustration, they describe the spirit of the Code of Ethics that is to guide an individual counselor in the development of their ethical behavior and decision making. This framework is what all the 2014 Code of Ethics is built upon (2014, ACA).

Social and cultural diversity are essential to the formation of a person desiring to counsel others. The value of all people and a willingness to celebrate cultural and social differences sets up a candidate for success with the widest variety of people and people groups as possible. This is a basis for willingness to grow and develop in cultural appreciation, no one arrives at cultural enlightenment, but they can be prepared to appreciate and value distinctions and similarities in all people.

Human growth and development is the backbone of relating to as many clients of different ages and abilities as possible. An appreciation of every developmental level is necessary to aid a client in developing to their full potential. Often, a counselor may specialize in childhood, adolescent, middle or late adulthood, but not necessarily. The family counseling process certainly involves spanning all ages and levels of development. Career development,

counseling relationships, assessments, and research are all areas that are essential to having a well-rounded level of insight into in order to best serve the client and further develop the field of counseling (Coppock, 2012).

For me personally, the principle of group counseling and group work has a great bearing as a guiding element of my development as an individual and as a professional counseling candidate. The process of personal growth for this counselor began with the aid of a group of people willing to open up and share vulnerably and bravely amongst other men. From experiences with 12 step fellowships and men's growth groups my desire to thrive individually and with others has emerged to become a passionate focus of counseling identity. The group element of focus and training is an essential one to the field, and I feel lends a particularly effective approach to development of individuals at all stages.

As I consider my journey of finding recovery groups were essential to finding safety, among a community of Christian brothers. I consider this is the beginning of my counselor identity. When I consider personal professional identity, my journey is reflected through the 12 step recovery model, but it is also egocentric, meaning that many other people will find healing in very different but healthy ways. Professional counselor identity is different than personal counselor identity. Like nesting dolls, the professional counselor identity is encapsulated within the vocational/professional counseling identity.

Another metaphor I relate my personal counseling identity to is a recreational vehicle (RV). The purpose of this vehicle being to have a place to stay while traveling from place to place. The idea of life as a road trip representative of life's journey. My counseling mantra following along the lines of "It's a long and winding road, enjoy it."

My counselor formation has included my own recovery/counseling journey, my education with Alliance University, and my practicum/internship experience at White Deer Run of Allenwood, PA. Through these means I have been exposed to and applied these nine elements: professional counseling orientation and ethical practice, social and cultural diversity, human growth and development, career development, counseling and helping relationships, group counseling and group work, assessment and testing, research and program evaluation. My education is ongoing and will be, of course, for my entire career. Currently, my approach to counselor identity using an integrative counseling approach (Holeman, 2011). I use a variety of approaches including cognitive behavioral therapy, components of dialectical behavioral therapy, mindfulness, attachment theory, application of 12 step model recovery, and narrative therapy components. I could relate to Gerald Corey, in relating his early process of counseling formation, he said, “[I] felt inept at first. Be patient, get good supervision, get your own personal therapy, go to a lot of workshops, get training and you will get better” (Casares, 2021). At times, the imposter syndrome enters, but as I share with my supervisors and other counselors, my experience is unexceptional and something experienced by many.

As a parting word relating to how I see the counseling process at work, day in and day out, “You have had a lot of pain in your life. You are a good steward of it?”...Stewardship of pain is to “keep in touch with the hard times of your past, during moments of pain you are most aware of others pain – most aware in that moment of your pain and God’s power” (CSEC, 2021). The pain of experience and the suffering of life informs the counseling process and develops my faith, and in turn the faith of the client, in themselves, in healing, and sows a seed of love for Christ.

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