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Forming a Professional Counselor Identity: The Impact of Identity Processing Style

Abstract

This study examined the impact of identity processing style on professional counselor identity development. 136 masters students in a CACREP-accredited counseling program completed a survey with measures of counselor identity and identity style. Results of the study signify that differences in identity processing style have an impact on the development of a professional counselor identity. The use of both informational and normative processing styles appear beneficial in forming a professional counselor identity, though the informational style alone was indicative of a professional counselor identity beyond identity commitment. The diffuse/avoidant style seems least suitable for developing a professional counselor identity.

Keywords

counselor identity, identity style, professional development, professional identity

Facilitating a professional counselor identity is a central goal for training programs in Counselor Education (CACREP, 2014; Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010). The formation of this counselor identity includes a process of engaging with values, attitudes, and actions championed by the profession, and working to integrate such values, attitudes, and actions with one's larger identity system. As trainees enter the counseling profession they represent a vast array of life experiences, beliefs, values, and worldviews. While affirming diversity of counselor trainees, counselor educators foster certain values, attitudes, and actions that unify the profession in serving a diverse society (ACA, 2014; Kaplan & Gladding, 2011). While development of a professional identity is strenuous for some counselors-in-training, clear differences exist among trainees regarding enthusiasm and willingness to engage in this process. Identity style theory (Berzonsky, 1989) offers a useful framework for identifying trainees' different approaches to this task. The identification of different approaches to forming a professional counselor identity can assist counselor educators and supervisors in tailoring interventions to particular trainees. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of Berzonsky's (1989) identity processing styles on the development of a professional counselor identity during master's level counselor training.

Counselor Professional Identity

The professional identity of counselors has been recognized as a salient focus in the counseling profession (Gale & Austin, 2003; Hanna & Bemak, 1997; Kaplan & Gladding, 2011; Mellin, Hunt, & Nichols, 2011; Van Hesteren & Ivey, 1990). This focus has two distinct but related areas: a) the identity of counseling as a unified profession (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011; Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014; Mellin et al., 2011; Reiner, Dobmeier, & Hernandez, 2013), and b) the development of individuals' professional counselor identities (Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003; Gibson et al., 2010). These two areas mutually inform one another with professional identity

shaped by the individuals it represents and the professional identity of individuals cultivated by the larger professional body.

The collective identity of the counseling profession has been marked by humanistic roots (Hansen, 2003; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 1999), emphasis on empowering relationships that facilitate human development and wellness (Eriksen & Kress, 2006; Kaplan et al., 2014; Mellin et al., 2011), and a contextual and culturally sensitive approach in counseling practice (ACA, 2014; Eriksen & Kress, 2006; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 1999; Van Hesteren & Ivey, 1990). The distinctiveness of this collective identity has been a central theme in the profession's struggles regarding the medical model and diagnosis of mental disorders (Eriksen & Kress, 2006; Hansen, 2003), the growing demand for empirically validated and empirically-supported therapies (Hansen, 2006, 2012), and the articulation of the counseling profession's unique and valuable contribution to the mental health needs of society (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011; Kaplan et al., 2014; Mellin et al., 2011; Reiner et al., 2013). The profession's struggles to articulate and maintain a collective identity often affects a parallel process in counselor-trainees who experience confusion regarding their professional identities. While identity confusion is developmentally appropriate for counselors-in-training, a significant responsibility remains with counselor educators, supervisors, and other leaders of the profession to cultivate core elements that unify and distinguish our profession (Calley & Hawley, 2008; Kaplan & Gladding, 2011; Reiner et al., 2013).

The development of a professional counselor identity involves exploring and working to integrate the professional values, attitudes, and behaviors proffered by the counseling community with one's larger identity system (Auxier et al., 2003; Gibson et al., 2010). Gibson et al. (2010) described this process as involving three transformational tasks: (a) the development of a personal definition of counseling, (b) the adoption of responsibility for professional growth, and (c) the

recognition of professional identity as interlinked with larger systems (i.e., the professional counseling community and larger systems of practice). By navigating these transformational tasks students experience significant fluctuations in confidence and emotion as they cycle through conceptual and experiential learning opportunities while processing evaluative feedback from faculty, supervisors, and peers (Auxier et al., 2003).

As students' identity systems experience the pressures associated with counselor training, their commitments in other identity domains are questioned and renegotiated (Grotevant, 1987). General domains of identity commonly researched across populations include: (a) religious ideology, (b) political ideology, (c) life philosophy and values, (d) family relationships, (e) gender roles, (f) friendships, (g) romantic relationships, and (h) recreation (Balistreri, Busch-Rossnagel, & Geisinger, 1995; Bennion & Adams, 1986). Additional areas of focus often explored include ethnic and sexual identity domains (Degges-White & Meyers, 2005; Hoffman, 2004; Phinney, 1990). While these domains not exhaustive, they show identity elements that may undergo renegotiation while students are in counselor-training programs. The integration of professional values, attitudes, and behaviors into one's identity system is a challenging task. While models of counselor identity development proffered by Auxier et al. (2003) and Gibson et al. (2010) help identify the experiences of students in the process, they do not account for differences among students in their approach to professional identity development. Berzonsky's (1989) identity style theory is a helpful framework for understanding different approaches to this task. By differentiating students' approaches to forming a professional counselor identity, counselor educators and supervisors can tailor interventions to the unique needs of each student.

Identity Style

Berzonsky's (1989) identity style theory postulates three different processes used by

individuals when approaching identity-related challenges: diffuse/avoidant style, normative style, and informational style. The *diffuse/avoidant style* represents a disposition toward putting off and avoiding identity-related decisions until required by external pressures. Use of the diffuse/avoidant style is associated with hedonistic values, power, and self-enhancement strategies (Berzonsky, Cieciuch, Duriez, & Soenens, 2011), lower levels of emotional intelligence (Seaton & Beaumont, 2008, 2011b), and lower levels of self-actualization and self-transcendence (Beaumont, 2009). When faced with external problems and stressors, persons utilizing a diffuse orientation tend toward avoidant-oriented coping strategies (Berzonsky, 1992b; Beaumont & Seaton, 2011) and an immature defense style that distorts reality to reduce anxiety (Seaton & Beaumont, 2011a). Furthermore, Berzonsky and Ferrari (2009) found that diffuse-oriented individuals are strategic in avoiding problems that might provide relevant feedback and rely on social cues to convince others that they possess desirable characteristics.

The *normative style* reflects a tendency to embrace identity standards held by significant others when subject to identity pressures. Consequently, identity commitments made by norm-oriented individuals tend to occur prior to significant personal exploration of alternatives (Berzonsky, 1989; Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000; Berzonsky & Neimeyer, 1994). Values associated with the normative style include tradition, conformity, and security (Berzonsky et al., 2011), which result in a closed disposition toward values and actions that may threaten core areas of the self (Berzonsky & Sullivan, 1992; Lile, 2013, 2015). When faced with external pressures, norm-oriented individuals are inclined toward problem-focused coping strategies (Beaumont & Seaton, 2011) and a defense style that alters personal feelings without dramatically distorting external reality (Seaton & Beaumont, 2011a).

The *informational style* represents a propensity to seek and evaluate information regarding identity decisions before making commitments. Values favored by informational-oriented individuals include universalism, benevolence, and openness (Berzonsky et al., 2011) manifesting in greater exploration and openness to new experiences (Berzonsky & Sullivan, 1992; Lile, 2013, 2015; Seaton & Beaumont, 2008). The use of an informational style is associated with higher emotional intelligence (Seaton & Beaumont, 2008, 2011b), self-actualization and self-transcendence (Beaumont, 2009), and personal wisdom (Beaumont, 2011). Specific areas of personal wisdom related to the informational style include cognitive, affective, and reflective wisdom, mindfulness, savoring beliefs, introspection, and an awareness of internal states (Beaumont, 2011; Berzonsky & Sullivan, 1992; Berzonsky & Luyckx, 2008). When faced with external pressures, informational-oriented individuals tend to use deliberate, proactive, and problem-focused coping strategies (Berzonsky, 1992b; Beaumont & Seaton, 2011; Seaton & Beaumont, 2008), and a mature defense style that optimally integrates reality and personal affect (Seaton & Beaumont, 2011a).

The three identity styles developed by Berzonsky (1989) represent different approaches to the task of identity formation. While individuals have access to each style, everyone has a primary style that they rely on (Berzonsky, 1989). Differences regarding the style used when approaching counselor identity development have significant implications for the successful integration of professional values, attitudes, and behaviors with one's identity system. This study was designed to examine the impact of these various identity styles on the professional identity development of counselors-in-training.

Objective for this Study

The objective for this study was to identify the impact of Berzonsky's (1989) identity processing

styles on the development of a professional counselor identity during master's level counselor-training. Research on the identity styles indicated that the diffuse/avoidant style is least effective in facilitating identity development, while the informational style is most effective. The following hypotheses are informed by previous findings and anticipate consistent results within the domain of a professional counselor identity:

Hypothesis 1: The diffuse/avoidant style negatively relates to a professional counselor identity. In contrast, the normative style, informational style, and identity commitment positively relate to a professional counselor identity.

Hypothesis 2: Differences in professional counselor identity are expected for the identity styles where the diffuse/avoidant style reflects the lowest level of professional counselor identity, the normative style reflects professional identity that is higher than the diffuse/avoidant style but lower than the informational style, and the informational style reflects the highest level of professional counselor identity.

Method

Participants

Students attending a CACREP-accredited masters counseling program within a private university in the Northeast were invited to participate in this study. Of the 141 students enrolled in the program, surveys with sufficient data were collected from 136 students (122 female, 12 male, 1 transgender) ranging in age from 21 to 59 years ($M = 30.13$, $SD = 8.22$). This produced a 96% response rate. Those enrolled in Clinical Mental Health Counseling (CMHC) accounted for 63% of the sample, while School Counseling (SC) students accounted for 36% of the sample. The majority of participants identified as White (81%) with 9% African-American, and 5% as Latino/a. The remaining participants (5%) identified as Native American, Asian, or other.

Instruments

Demographic Information. A short demographic questionnaire provided information regarding age, gender, race/ethnicity, number of counseling courses completed, area of concentration (CMHC or SC), and internship enrollment. For the last variable, students enrolled in both practicum and internship were combined for comparison with students who had not yet reached practicum/internship. The demographic variables were used in examining differences among participants.

Professional Counselor Identity. The revised Professional Identity and Values Scale (PIVS-R) (La Guardia, 2009) was used to assess professional counselor identity. This scale calculates scores for two subscales, Professional Orientation and Values and Professional Development, which produce an overall professional identity score according to responses on 32 items (18 and 14 items respectively for each subscale). Sample items for the scale included: “Client empowerment is a fundamental component in the counseling process” (Professional Orientation and Values) and “I feel confident in my role as a counseling professional” (Professional Development). These items are on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Cronbach’s alphas were computed for this sample yielding scores of .73 for Professional Orientation and Values (POV), .78 for Professional Development (PD), and .82 for the overall scale.

Identity Style. The third revision of the identity style inventory (ISI-3; Berzonsky, 1992a) was used to assess identity style. This 40-item measure produced participant scores in three identity-style domains (diffuse/avoidant, normative, and informational) and a domain for identity commitment. Some example items included: “It doesn’t pay to worry about values in advance; I decide things as they happen” (diffuse/avoidant style); “Once I know the correct way to handle a

problem, I prefer to stick with it” (normative style); and “I’ve spent a lot of time and talked to a lot of people trying to develop a set of values that make sense to me” (informational style). Items are on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all like me) to 5 (very much like me). For this sample, Cronbach’s alphas were .67 for the diffuse/avoidant style, .60 for the normative style, .65 for the informational style, and .64 for identity commitment.

Participants were ascribed a primary identity style based on the recommended procedures of Berzonsky (1992b), which indicated standardization of raw scores for each style scale to ascribe the participant’s highest standardized score as the preferred identity style. The distribution of identity styles for the given sample were: 44 participants primarily diffuse/avoidant (32%), 43 primarily normative (32%), and 49 primarily informational (36%). This distribution of participants was consistent with that found among other populations where the ISI-3 has been used.

Procedures

A survey including the instruments described above was administered to students during classes across the counseling department. Approval from the Institutional Review Board was attained, and the researcher adhered to the ACA Code of Ethics (2014) during the study. An informed consent form was given to participants prior to survey administration. Completion of the survey took approximately 20 minutes. No identifying information beyond demographic information was gathered to protect participant anonymity.

Data Analyses

Preliminary analyses were conducted regarding the potential for interactions that age, number of courses completed, and internship enrollment may have had with the identity constructs (identity style and professional identity). Correlational analyses were used for age and the number of courses completed with the identity constructs and two separate multivariate analyses of

variance (MANOVAs) for internship enrollment with the PIVS and ISI-3 subscales respectively. These preliminary analyses enabled the researcher to control for these variables in subsequent analyses. To address the first hypothesis, correlational analyses for professional identity and identity style constructs were considered. This was followed by a hierarchical regression analysis that controlled for the number of courses completed and identity commitment while examining the contributions of the normative and informational styles on professional identity. Finally, to address the second hypothesis, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was utilized to examine difference among the identity styles on professional identity. For this analysis, internship enrollment was controlled for as a covariate. These analyses are presented in greater detail within the results section.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Intercorrelations for age and number of courses completed with identity constructs.

To examine the potential impact of age and the number of courses completed, these variables were included in the intercorrelational analyses with the professional identity and identity style constructs. The results of these analyses are in Table 1. Age correlations were found with the total PIVS score ($r = .16, p < .05$), normative style ($r = -.16, p < .05$), informational style ($r = .25, p < .01$), and identity commitment ($r = .32, p < .01$). Intercorrelations for the number of courses completed were found with the PIVS total score ($r = .32, p < .01$), professional development ($r = .39, p < .001$), and identity commitment ($r = .22, p < .01$).

Internship enrollment differences among the identity constructs.

Considering the potential for differences among the identity constructs based on participants' enrollment in practicum/internship work, separate multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were

conducted for the PIVS and ISI-3 subscales respectively. Due to differences in group size (46 enrolled in internship, 90 not enrolled), tests for homogeneity of covariance were conducted for each analysis. For differences on the PIVS subscales, Box's M was not significant, $F(3, 210330) = 1.49, p > .05$, enabling further examination of the results. A significant multivariate effect was found for internship enrollment on the PIVS subscales, $F(2, 133) = 8.91, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$. A significant univariate effect was found for the PD subscale ($F = 16.75, p < .001$); with those enrolled in internship ($M = 59.74, SD = 8.43$) scoring higher in professional development than those who had not yet reached the internship ($M = 54.31, SD = 6.69$). No difference was found for the POV subscale regarding enrollment in internship. Internship enrollment differences on the ISI-3 subscales were then considered. After testing for homogeneity of covariance, no multivariate effects of internship enrollment on the ISI-3 subscales were found: $F(1, 134) = 2.17, p > .05$.

Intercorrelations among Professional Identity and Identity Style Constructs

Table 1 shows all correlations among the variables for the study utilizing a .05 alpha level for significance. Total PIVS scores were positively related to the normative style ($r = .23, p < .01$), informational style ($r = .41, p < .01$), and identity commitment ($r = .38, p < .01$); the POV subscale scores were positively related to an informational style ($r = .40, p < .01$) and identity commitment ($r = .24, p < .01$); the PD subscale scores were positively related to the normative style ($r = .25, p < .01$), informational style ($r = .25, p < .01$), and identity commitment ($r = .36, p < .01$). No significant relationships were found between professional identity and the diffuse/avoidant style.

Hierarchical Regression Analysis

To examine the predictive value of the identity styles (normative and informational) on PIVS total scores, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted controlling for the number of courses completed in Step 1 and identity commitment in Step 2. The normative and

Table 1

Correlations between Age, Courses Completed, Professional Identity, and Identity Styles

<i>Variables</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	—	.03	.16*	.10	.14	-.13	-.16*	.25**	.32**
2. Courses complete		—	.32**	.09	.39***	.06	.13	.02	.22**
3. Total PIVS			—	.76**	.81**	-.06	.23**	.41**	.38**
4. POV				—	.23**	-.01	.11	.40**	.24**
5. PD					—	-.08	.25**	.25**	.36**
6. Diffuse/avoidant style						—	-.05	-.16*	-.33**
7. Normative style							—	.02	.30**
8. Informational style								—	.40**
9. Identity commitment									—

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

informational styles were entered in Step 3 utilizing a stepwise method to evaluate the unique contributions of each style to the model. Results of this analysis are in Table 2.

In Step 1, the number of courses completed by participants significantly predicted PIVS total scores ($\beta = .32, R^2 = .10, p < .001$). Then in Step 2, identity commitment made a significant contribution to PIVS total scores after controlling for the number of courses completed ($\beta = .33, \Delta R^2 = .10, p < .001$). Controlling for both courses completed and identity commitment in Step 3, the informational style was predictive of PIVS total scores ($\beta = .33, \Delta R^2 = .09, p < .001$), while the normative style was not. The overall model accounted for 29.5% of the variance in PIVS total scores.

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression for Professional Identity Overall Score

	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>R</i> ² <i>Change</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>
Step 1	.32	.10***					
Number of Courses Completed				.52	.14	.32***	3.89
Step 2	.45	.20***	.10***				
Number of Courses Completed				.40	.13	.25**	3.09
Identity Commitment				.81	.20	.33***	4.11
Step 3	.54	.30***	.09***				
Number of Courses Completed				.45	.12	.27***	3.60
Identity Commitment				.46	.21	.19*	2.25
Informational Style				.75	.18	.33***	4.11

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Style Comparisons for Professional Identity

To examine style differences in professional identity an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted. Controlling for internship enrollment as a covariate, the professional identity total score (PIVS) was entered as the dependent variable with primary identity style as the independent variable. Bonferroni adjustments were used for the multiple comparisons. The analysis was significant for the covariate (internship enrollment), $F(1, 132) = 7.63, p < .01$. After controlling for internship enrollment, between-subject effects were additionally significant, $F(2, 132) = 5.71, p < .01$ with the diffuse/avoidant style ($M = 136.96, SD = 9.43$) scoring significantly lower in PIVS total scores than both the normative style ($M = 143.65, SD = 11.67$) and the informational style ($M = 143.62, SD = 12.03$). No difference was identified between the normative and informational styles in PIVS total scores.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of identity style on the development of a professional counselor identity. In general, the diffuse/avoidant style was expected to reflect lower levels of professional counselor identity with normative and informational styles expected to reflect progressively higher levels of professional counselor identity. Results of the study confirmed that the diffuse/avoidant style was unrelated to professional identity, while the normative and informational styles were both associated with the professional identity of counselors. While identity commitment accounted for the relationship between the normative style and professional identity, the informational style alone was predictive of a professional counselor identity beyond these commitments. The hypothesized relationships were largely supported with minor exceptions. These results and their implications for counselor training are discussed beginning with the preliminary analyses.

Demographic Differences in Professional Identity

Preliminary analyses revealed interactions of age, number of courses completed, and internship enrollment with participants' professional identity. Participants' age was positively related to their overall professional identity, which indicated an increase in professional identity as students' age rose. This may reflect a more intentional decision-making process about joining the counseling profession, and/or a greater investment in the profession due to life-stage responsibilities and pressures. Older students may experience greater pressure to commit and invest in their career to meet financial and/or relational needs in their lives. Research is needed in this area to better understand the interaction between age and professional identity found in this study.

Participants' progress in their programs of study also yielded interactional effects with professional identity. Reflected in both the number of courses completed and internship enrollment variables was a trend of stronger professional identity with progress within a program. This is good news regarding the impact of counselor training on the development of a professional counselor identity. Within this trend it is noteworthy that the increase in overall professional identity was accounted for by increases within the professional development subscale and not the professional orientation and values subscale. This seems to indicate that student participants for this study were more focused on the tasks and skills of professional practice while in training and less concerned with assimilating the beliefs and values of the profession. Gibson et al. (2010) found that "New and prepracticum CITs [Counselors In Training] focused on their individual skills and qualities as defining their professional identities..." (p. 30), and that identification with the larger professional community of counseling tended to occur later in training. The findings of this study are consistent with those of Gibson et al. (2010) regarding an early emphasis on skills for practice. However, the

transition to identifying with the larger professional community, as this involves considering beliefs and values of the whole profession, may be a process that unfolds after graduation for participants of this study.

Identity Commitment and Professional Counselor Identity

Identity commitment was hypothesized to positively relate to a professional counselor identity (Hypothesis 1). This hypothesis was supported with identity commitment relating to the PIVS total score and each of the POV and PD subscale scores. Moreover, identity commitment was identified as a significant predictor of a professional counselor identity accounting for 10% of the variance in PIVS total scores after controlling for the number of courses completed by students.

Identity commitment has long been understood as a central task in the process of identity development (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966), and results of this study indicate that commitment remains central in the formation of a professional counselor identity. Interestingly, after controlling for identity commitment (and number of courses completed), the informational style alone was predictive of a professional counselor identity. This suggests that identity commitment accounts for the strength of professional identity among those relying on a normative style, but not for those utilizing an informational style. This finding highlights the importance of *how* identity commitments are made when considering professional counselor identity formation. Unique to the informational style is a period of exploration (or considering meaningful alternatives) prior to making commitments. This exploration appears to yield distinct qualities associated with a professional counselor identity that supersede commitment alone. Use of the informational style has been associated with universalism and openness to new experiences (Berzonsky & Sullivan, 1992; Lile, 2013, 2015; Seaton & Beaumont, 2008), higher levels of emotional intelligence (Seaton & Beaumont, 2008, 2011b), and self-transcendence (Beaumont, 2009). These qualities unique to

the informational style are compatible with a counselor professional identity and may lend themselves to the exploration process.

Identity Styles and Professional Counselor Identity

Diffuse/avoidant style. The diffuse/avoidant style was hypothesized to negatively relate to a professional counselor identity (Hypothesis 1) and to reflect the lowest professional counselor identity scores of the three identity styles (Hypothesis 2). Hypothesis 1 lacked compelling support with results indicating negative non-significant relationships for the diffuse/avoidant style with the PIVS total score and the POV and PD subscales respectively. Rather than having a pronounced negative association with a professional counselor identity, these results suggest that individuals using a diffuse/avoidant style are more indifferent toward development of a professional counselor identity and are not engaged in this task during their counseling studies.

The hypothesized differences in professional identity between the diffuse/avoidant and other identity styles was supported with the diffuse/avoidant style significantly lower in the PIVS total score than both the normative and informational styles. These findings indicate that individuals utilizing a diffuse/avoidant style are least likely to engage in the development of a professional counselor identity. Likewise they are consistent with previous research that characterizes the diffuse/avoidant style as one that is avoidant of identity-related decisions (Beaumont & Seaton, 2011; Berzonsky, 1992b; Berzonsky & Ferrari, 2009), and which utilizes an immature defense style under external pressure (Seaton & Beaumont, 2011a).

Counselor educators and supervisors seeking to promote a counselor identity among students oriented towards a diffuse/avoidant style may need to consider the strategic and avoidant nature by which these individuals cope with challenges (Beaumont & Seaton, 2011; Berzonsky, 1992b; Berzonsky & Ferrari, 2009) and seek to reduce anxiety (Seaton & Beaumont, 2011a). Being

mindful of a student's defenses and working to minimize these defenses when promoting professional identity development will be important. At the same time, strategically developing interventions/assignments that minimize opportunities for inauthentic imitation will also be crucial. Finally, it is important to recall that while individuals have a dominant style, they do have access to each identity style (Berzonsky, 1989). Counselor educators and supervisors need to look for those instances in which diffuse/avoidant-oriented students utilize other styles and effectively engage in tasks related to their professional identity. Highlighting and reinforcing these instances may be the most effective interventions available.

Normative style. Because of its tendency toward identity commitment, the normative style was expected to have a positive relationship with professional identity (Hypothesis 1). Additionally, the normative style was hypothesized to be higher in professional counselor identity than the diffuse/avoidant style and lower in professional identity than the informational style (Hypothesis 2). Correlational results of this study largely support Hypothesis 1, indicating a significant positive relationship with an overall professional counselor identity, and the PD subscale in particular. No significant relationship was found between the normative style and the POV subscale. Norm-oriented students appear to engage in the development of specific skills and knowledge necessary for counseling practice while missing the consideration of values within the profession. Interestingly, the normative style was not predictive of a professional counselor identity after controlling for the number of courses completed and identity commitment. It seems that the inclination towards identity commitment is the driving force for engagement in professional identity tasks for norm-oriented individuals. These findings are consistent with previous research identifying a tendency for norm-oriented individuals to be closed to values that may threaten the self (Berzonsky & Sullivan, 1992; Lile, 2013, 2015).

The expected differences in professional identity between the normative style and other identity styles was partially supported. The normative identity style was significantly higher in PIVS total scores than the diffuse/avoidant style. However, no significant differences were found between the normative and informational styles on PIVS total scores. Norm-oriented participants for this study were significantly more engaged in professional identity formation than those utilizing a diffuse/avoidant style.

Counselor educators and supervisors seeking to promote counselor identity development in norm-oriented trainees might tend to the process these students utilize in addressing counseling issues. While participants utilizing the normative and informational styles were equally high in their professional counselor identity, use of the normative style appears to depend on identity commitments that may have been foreclosed on. This tendency toward foreclosure for those utilizing a normative style is documented in previous literature (Berzonsky, 1989; Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000; Berzonsky & Neimeyer, 1994). Facilitating a process of identifying and considering alternative positions on counseling issues and helping norm-oriented students to suspend judgment to critically evaluate the alternatives would be most appropriate. During this process, educators and supervisors need to be mindful of the significant emotional toll these students experience when considering alternative points of view. It is necessary to acknowledge these emotional challenges and encourage norm-oriented students to honestly reflect on these experiences. Counselor educators and supervisors also need to be aware of, understand, and minimize student defenses when intervening to promote counselor identity development. A goal toward fostering increasing flexibility and openness to different perspectives will be most beneficial in cultivating a professional counselor identity that is more fully integrated within the identity system.

Informational style. The informational style was expected to have a positive relationship with a professional counselor identity (Hypothesis 1), and to reflect the highest professional identity scores of the identity styles (Hypothesis 2). In support of Hypothesis 1, significant positive relationships were identified for the informational style with overall professional identity and the POV and PD subscales respectively. Those utilizing an informational style appear to engage in both the consideration of professional values and the development of counseling skills and knowledge. The informational style was the only identity style that predicted professional counselor identity after controlling for the number of courses completed and identity commitment.

The anticipated differences between the informational style and other identity styles was supported in part. The informational style was significantly higher than the diffuse/avoidant style in overall PIVS. However, no significant differences were found between the informational and normative styles regarding overall PIVS scores. Individuals utilizing an informational style are more engaged in professional identity formation than those utilizing a diffuse/avoidant style.

Counselor educators and supervisors working with informational-oriented students can directly foster the identity development process by providing resources and opportunities for active engagement in the professional community (presentations/teaching, research, conferences). In addition, providing experiential opportunities for these students to flesh out their strengths and qualities in their new professional role will aid their professional development. When working with informational-oriented students, counselor educators can adopt an optimal role of support and guidance trusting that these students are actively engaged in the process of professional identity development. Respecting the autonomy of such students is important to communicate this trust in their ability to make appropriate and informed decisions.

Limitations and Future Research

There are limitations to this study regarding single-measurement design and sample composition. The single-measurement design does not provide data regarding the development of a professional counselor identity over time. Longitudinal research examining the impact of identity style on the development of a counselor identity, both during a training program and in the years following, would be helpful. Additionally, the generalization of this study's results is limited by the composition of this sample. The sample was derived from a single counseling program, and may reflect unique qualities and characteristics of this program's student demographic. Further research is necessary to adequately understand the impact of identity style on professional counselor identity across counseling programs and student populations.

Despite the limitations of this study, its results offer initial evidence for the role of identity styles in the development of a professional counselor identity. While the normative and informational styles reflected distinct strengths in this process, use of an informational style appears to hold the most potential for counselor identity development. The diffuse/avoidant style reflects the least potential for supporting this process. There is much to be gleaned from future studies examining the meditational effects of identity style on interventions that target counselor identity development.

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