Embracing Counsellor Professional Identity Work: Experiential Accounts of Transformation and Transition
Place au travail identitaire des conseillers et conseillères professionnels : Comptes rendus expérientiels de la transformation et de la transition

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ABSTRACT

This case study examines how counsellors navigate and negotiate the construction of their professional identity amid unfolding legislation set to regulate the helping professions. Ten counsellors—students, novice level, and experienced practitioners—were interviewed. The data were subject to analysis using a thematic network method designed by Attride-Stirling (2001) that resulted in five themes: (a) identity challenges and ensuing tensions, (b) facilitators of identity construction, (c) meaningfulness and sensemaking at the heart of identity work, (d) counsellors embracing their identity building, and (e) transmitting core elements and dimensionality of counsellor identity. Implications of the overall findings for counsellors and counsellor training are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cette étude de cas, on analyse la façon dont les conseillers et conseillères abordent et entament la construction de leur identité professionnelle dans le cadre d'une législation émergente mise en place pour régir les professions d'aidant. On a interviewé dix conseillers / conseillères (étudiants, novices et praticiens chevronnés). Pour analyser les données, on a eu recours à une méthode de réseau thématique conçue par Attride-Stirling (2001), qui a permis de dégager cinq thématiques : (a) les défis liés à l'identité et les tensions qui en découlent, (b) les facilitateurs de la construction d'identité, (c) pertinence et signification au cœur du travail identitaire, (d) des conseillers et conseillères qui embrassent l'édification de leur identité et (e) la transmission des éléments et des dimensions clés de l'identité de conseiller / conseillère. On y discute des implications des résultats globaux en ce qui concerne les conseillers et conseillères, ainsi que les modalités de leur formation.

An environment of increasing regulation and changes to the remit of health care professions has introduced lingering uncertainty for counsellors and the profession in various locations and at different points in time (Handelsman & Uhlemann, 1998; Macleod & McSherry, 2007; Stanley & Manthei, 2004; Tudor, 2013). Variability in title use, modifications to the therapy discourse, the splitting of counselling and psychotherapy, theoretical incommensurability, ideological

shifts, and a proliferation of subspecialties are just some of the contentious issues that have been debated and identified as detrimental to counsellor professional identity for both the individual and the profession on various international fronts (Hansen, 2003; Kaplan & Gladding, 2011; Murphy, 2011; Pointon, 2009). By contrast, the issue of regulation and its impact on Canadian counsellors has neither received the same level of debate and disquiet nor the amplitude of research inquiry found elsewhere due in part to it being a rather current undertaking, particularly in the case of Ontario (Gazzola & Smith, 2007; Gazzola, Smith, Kearney, & King-Andrews, 2010; Martin, Turcotte, Matte, & Shepard, 2013).

COUNSELLOR IDENTITY IN A REGULATORY CLIMATE

Regulation and licensing members of mental health professionals fall under the authority of provincial jurisdictions in Canada. For the moment, counselling and psychotherapy regulation exists in only four provinces (Ontario, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Quebec), with the remaining jurisdictions at various points of deliberation (Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association [CCPA], 2010; Martin et al., 2013). In the province of Ontario, a College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (2015) was established by the government through the Ontario Psychotherapy Act (Government of Ontario, 2007) following an update of the Regulated Health Professions Act. Under the Psychotherapy Act, the title "psychotherapist" is currently protected for registered members. Restrictions to activities falling within the purview of a psychotherapist by this act were only fully proclaimed in December 2017.

A call for discussion on the rationale and potential repercussions of these impending changes set to affect counsellors in Ontario was made by Alves and Gazzola (2013) around eligibility, impact on practice, and the use of the title "counsellor." This concern followed from their study of experienced counsellors, some of whom were hopeful that regulatory changes might bring professional privileges, economic gain, and status. Others, however, had trepidations about many of the uncertainties (e.g., third-party billing, title use, client perceptions, intended outcomes, parameters of practice, a confounding of language; Alves & Gazzola, 2013).

Gignac and Gazzola (2016) examined counsellor identity construction utilizing a virtual asynchronous focus group against the same backdrop of professional regulatory legislation. Their findings also highlighted a "need for cautious deliberation when instituting the reservation of a title and certain core practices in a field where titles and scopes overlap, to avoid marginalization of a valuable service group" (p. 315). Furthermore, when counsellors are uncertain of their place among the helping professions and distracted by associated tensions that temporarily destabilize counsellor identity, this has the potential to compromise the welfare of practitioners and the viability of sustaining sound treatment (Alves & Gazzola, 2013; Gazzola, De Stefano, Audet, & Theriault, 2011).

Mooring Counsellor Identity

During periods of uncertainty, the loss of connection between the personal and social domains can usher in a state of liminality (Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra, 2007; Turner, 1982) or a sense of being suspended between the dimming and anticipated identity (Ibarra, 2003; Newman, 1999). Amid this confusion, individuals often feel "they have lost the narrative thread of their life" (Ibarra, 2007, p. 7). Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt (2007) proposed that a sound professional identity, clearly defined, and highly entitative (i.e., having a sense of belonging, stability, and common purpose) can provide "moorings" during these unsettled times. Ashforth (2007) and Lifton (1993) put forward a "protean" perspective for consideration.

Lifton (1993) portrayed the protean individual as someone actively willing, in the face of identity uncertainty, to become vastly adaptive at morphing in response to threats or disruptions while being equally competent to affect a degree of consolidation beyond the moment. What Ashforth (2007) proposed was a social identity defined by flexibility that utilized the stability of professional or occupational moorings as a way to reframe the threat or uncertainty of inevitable change. Within the existing literature on counsellor identity development and critical change incidents, this notion of a protean, adaptive response or way of reframing change as a useful facilitator has not received substantial consideration but holds potential for counsellors to define themselves as flexible and willing to use change for their benefit (Ashforth, 2007; Bartel, Blader, & Wrzesniewski, 2007).

The introduction of statutory regulation and the unfolding agenda accompanying this external change event have both macro (the profession) and micro (individual counsellor) level implications for the professional identity of counsellors. Ontario counsellors are working through issues their counterparts have experienced or transitioned through during regulatory changes elsewhere (e.g., Australia [Tudor, 2013]; United Kingdom [House, 2001]; Canada [Bryce, 2012]; [Ordre des Conseillers et Conseillères du Québec, 2013]). Little attention has been paid to this kind of change event in a Canadian context while it is unfolding and with a particular focus on the experiences of local, provincial-level counsellors (Alves & Gazzola, 2013). Also lacking are studies that consider the dynamics of counsellor identity construction that are more complex than acquiring a role (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and involves an iterative shaping and negotiation under transitional conditions (Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra, 2007).

Professional Identity Construction

The literature on professional identity construction is quite rich, given the interdisciplinary breadth of those wishing to understand how individuals negotiate who they are within their professional role (Cope, Bezemer, Mavroveli, & Kneebone, 2017; Pratt et al., 2006; Slay & Smith, 2011; Tomer & Mishra, 2016). The construction process assumes a personal investment in this creative endeavour

whereby the individual assumes agency for the shaping and sustainment of their "identity project" (Watson, 2008, p. 128; see also Beech & Huxham, 2003). This is described as a three-part process where social identity (e.g., counsellor) or professional scripts (e.g., professional counsellor) are recognized within the social discourses (e.g., professionalism) and shaped during identity work while the individual is simultaneously gathering inputs from the self or personal identity to actively (or passively) create the social self amid variable degrees of tension or contradiction (Watson, 2008).

Originating from research in organizational studies on the process of identity construction, the concept of identity work emerged from an awareness of the complexity, struggles, and pressures the individuals face in the social world where identity is in constant flux (Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and reconstruction is almost inevitable (Giddens, 1991; Watson, 2008). Identity work is described as "the ongoing mental activity that an individual undertakes in constructing an understanding of self that is coherent, distinct, and positively valued" and is sometimes accelerated during destabilization to manage anxious self-questioning (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008, p. 15; see also Beech, MacIntosh, & McInnes, 2008; Collinson, 2003; Ibarra, 1999). Negotiation processes associated with identity work link both personal and social identities (i.e., professional identity being one of these) because identity work entails revisions to the person's external self in tandem with the reshaping of the personal, or internal, identity dimensions (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Watson, 2008).

Several constructs associated with the dynamics of identity work have direct relevance to counsellor professional identity construction such as identification (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008), sensemaking (Weick, 1995), and customization (Pratt et al., 2006). Identification speaks to having a sense of belonging through affinity, emulation, or recognizing oneself within the group during identity transition (Pratt, 1998), often involving "successive disequilibrations" (Marcia, 2002, p. 14) and turning points (Bullis & Bach, 1989).

Sensemaking means finding structures or frames for dealing with uncertainty for the express purpose of being able to take action, and this is done through "sensebreaking" (i.e., self-questioning), "sensegiving" (i.e., redefining a preferred identity), and "enactment" (e.g., use of identity markers like office decor) (Ashforth et al., 2008; see also Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Customization of professional identity is an active response to identity violation (or threat) brought about by work/role changes (Pratt et al., 2006) and involves three different approaches: (a) "enriching" (i.e., deepening, refining identity), (b) "patching" (i.e., amalgamating identities to fill gaps), and (c) "splinting" (e.g., shored up by a previous identity). Conceptualizing counsellor professional identity construction within the dynamics of identity work allows for the complexities of the identity-change nexus (i.e., counsellor professional identity and statutory regulation changes) to be more thoroughly scrutinized, thus avoiding hasty suppositions about risk or opportunity stemming from this exogenous event (Beech et al., 2008).

Counsellor professional identity has been well articulated, differentiated, and substantiated in the counselling literature (Gale & Austin, 2003; Hansen, Speciale, & Lemberger, 2014; McLaughlin & Boettcher, 2009; Remley & Herlihy, 2007). Several counsellor development models addressing professional formation and acculturation as a linear, progressive stage determining pursuit of endpoint mastery have featured some aspect of identity work (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010; Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Stoltenberg, 1981).

Some studies have examined the impact of critical incidents or developmental turning points on the development of counsellor identity as both transformative and crisis-inducing (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006; Skovholt & McCarthy, 1988). Although this has helped to shape an understanding of counsellor identity as part of the developmental trajectory, there are evolving instances of unprecedented exogenous changes that often interrupt the life-career path of every professional and trigger new identity work (Beech et al., 2008). Our goal was to explore and deepen our understanding of the dynamic elements facilitating identity work and the interactive mechanisms drawn upon (e.g., resources, decisional tactics, sensemaking process). We also wanted to capture a moment-by-moment, real-time account of the iterative process of professional becoming (Scanlon, 2011). The unique context of this exogenous change event and timely occurrence offered a fortuitous opportunity to extend current conceptualizations of professional identity construction as portrayed in the developmental literature.

This case study was quite important given the prevailing situation for Ontario counsellors who were going about their identity work during this exogenous change event. It had the potential to alter in some manner the way they viewed themselves as professionals, their current trajectory of professional becoming, and the ongoing, emergent growth of their counsellor identity. It would also determine what they could call themselves and the areas of practice that would still be within their remit (i.e., authorized area of practice) if they chose, declined, or perhaps were not eligible to fall under the regulation title(s) or restrictions imposed by the Psychotherapy Act when it was fully enacted (i.e., restrictions on both title and activities). Nothing prevents counsellors from continuing to use the title "counsellor," but the boundaries and scope of their practice will be seriously curtailed under this new legislation. This may lead some to pursue other professions, perhaps those who have "found themselves languishing at the margins and striving to legitimize their work as professionals" (Butler, Chillas, & Muhr, 2012, p. 260) when circumstances shifted.

The goal of this study was to gather a descriptive, contextualized understanding of professional identity construction and negotiation by exploring the experiential accounts of counsellors. To obtain a holistic appreciation, this case study examined the surrounding context (e.g., local, professional, and practice settings), the significant actors (e.g., student, novice, experienced counsellors), and their related activities (e.g., education, mentoring, client work). The main question guiding the research was "How do counsellors negotiate their professional identity amid

changes to the remit of their profession?" To deepen our understanding, we pursued three subquestions:

1. What do counsellors draw upon to construct, rework, or maintain their professional identity during this kind of change event?
2. How do counsellors reconcile identity discrepancies, if any, and the uncertainty accompanying this period of transition?
3. How do counsellors portray and narrate this experience of professional becoming?

<div align="center">METHOD</div>

The investigation under discussion was part of a broader research agenda on counsellor professional identity that utilized case study methodology and hence sought multiple lines of inquiry.[1] Its purpose was to examine a contemporary occurrence of professional identity construction and negotiation transpiring in real time to gain a deeper sense of the dynamics that articulated or activated this iterative process (Ashforth et al., 2008; Schutz, 1964). This instrumental case involved Ontario counsellors during a discrete period of professional regulatory change, and this inquiry strategy allowed us to apprehend a holistic, contextualized understanding of their identity work and professional becoming process (Scanlon, 2011). To this end, a series of individual semistructured interviews and an asynchronous (not in real time) virtual focus group were chosen as the two main data sources.

In this article, we will focus solely on results from the individual interviews. Data from the focus group will *not* be included, as the interview respondents were not involved in the virtual focus group. To ensure multiple distinct lines of inquiry, there was no overlap between the two sample groups. Findings from the focus group were recently published (Gignac & Gazzola, 2016). In harmony with requirements for ethical research involving humans, this project secured the mandatory approval of the Research Ethics Board of the University of Ottawa before its commencement. After outlining the purpose of the study and providing information about the interview process, informed consent was obtained from the research participants.

Participants

For our study, a *counsellor* was defined as a professional currently holding, or in the process of completing, a master's degree in counselling or a related field that included completion of a supervised practicum. Participants either held the national credential of Canadian Certified Counsellor (CCPA, 2010) or were members of other certification and/or licensing bodies possessing equivalent credentialing. Our intention was to include a range of counsellor voices, so we appealed broadly to capture students (currently enrolled in counsellor education/training programs), novice counsellors (within five years post-master's degree), experienced counsellors (more than five years post-master's), and counsellor educators from the province of Ontario.

Participants were recruited through a counselling profession electronic mailing list, counsellor training programs, community and postsecondary counselling centres, professional counselling associations, and other provincial mental health services. In keeping with the study's intentions, we attained reasonable representation across the interview participants with 1 student counsellor, 4 novice counsellors (i.e., < 5 years' experience), and 5 experienced counsellors (i.e., > 5 years). The sample size (N = 10) was in line with other qualitative studies on counsellor identity that utilized participant interviews (e.g., Gazzola et al., 2011). The participants ranged in age from 25 to 66 years with a mean age of 43 (SD = 13.7); 8 identified as female and 2 as male. The predominant theoretical orientation was client-centred (n = 5) with solution-focused and multitheoretical or integrative being the next two dominant approaches (n = 3). Participants were counsellors-in-training or practicing in various settings: university or college counselling services (n = 6), private practice (n = 3), and community mental health services (n = 1).

Data Collection

Data were gathered from participants during a series of interviews, conducted by the first author, that incorporated a brief observation period, semistructured questions, a participant diagramming exercise, and a metaphor request. Participants were given a detailed explanation of the diagramming and metaphor exercises and how these would occur during the interview process. The two audio-taped interviews (60 and 90 minutes, respectively) were conducted with participants over a 3-month period sensitive to their workplace schedules.

Interviews

Informed by the research questions and a review of the appropriate literature, a semistructured interview guide was developed (available upon request). The interview script consisted of 30 questions inquiring about (a) the counsellor's sense of professional identity, (b) the construction and communication of professional identity, and (c) negotiating the construction of counsellor identity amid a change context. Minor refinements to sequencing and wording of the guide followed from the pilot and review by an external investigator knowledgeable in the topic area.

At the outset of the first interview, participants were invited to point out any physical identity markers (Miwa & Hanyu, 2006) that communicated their professional identity as a counsellor. These identity markers often include physical artifacts (e.g., diplomas, artwork, signage) and environmental indicators (e.g., lighting, furniture placement, room layout) that can communicate the prominence or uniqueness of a profession (Elsbach, 2004; Pressly & Heesacker, 2001). During this observation phase, the researcher relied on the participant to direct the researcher's gaze, indicate what needed to be noted, and propose the meaning through a negotiated dialogue (Angen, 2000). This allowed the researcher to collect data on setting, activities, atmosphere, and symbolic factors while moving between observation and clarification.

The first interview then moved to a series of semistructured questions on the participant's sense of professional identity, its construction, and how it was communicated. The second part of this interview involved the diagramming exercise that asked participants to create a summary drawing to capture the construction of their professional identity just described in the interview exchange (Umoquit et al., 2008). When completed, participants were asked to walk the researcher through their diagram to ensure details and active features (i.e., movement, directional, temporal) were noted in their words with their meanings.

The second interview had two parts. It began with a series of semistructured questions on the participants' negotiation of professional identity amid the current change context (i.e., unfolding professional regulation in their provincial jurisdiction). During the second half of the interview, participants were invited to offer a visual and/or verbal metaphor to describe the negotiation and navigation of their professional identity construction amid the current change context. Eliciting metaphors encourages individuals to tap into their experiences and use creative image-making to draw out the contextual details in richer, more nuanced ways (Deacon, 2000). Clarification was sought intermittently by the researcher as participants walked through their completed metaphors (visual and verbal) and provided interpretations in their own words.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from the 20 audio-taped interviews were analyzed using an inductive approach to direct the interpretation of themes and patterns working with the data from the ground up (Patton, 1990). What we mean by this is that the researchers remained close to the meanings and categories verbalized by the participants to avoid misinterpretation or biased shaping of their experiential accounts (Denzin, 2001). The verbatim transcription derived from the audio-taped interviews along with visual data from the diagramming and metaphor exercises (and accompanying verbal explanations) were coded by the first author, a doctoral student in counselling education. These were audited by the second author. Coding involved identifying both text and images within the entire data set that were linked by a similar theme to facilitate categorization. Before beginning this process, all identifying information was removed from the data set of each participant to ensure confidentiality.

The researchers adopted the thematic analysis network procedure designed by Attride-Stirling (2001) that guides the analysis through stages of reduction, exploration, and integration. Each of the six steps associated with these stages was followed, and the thematic networks or "web-like illustrations" used to visually map the lines of interpretation or thematic patterns in the data were also implemented (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Subject to this systematic analysis, the data were sorted as initial themes emerged, then sorted under relevant subthemes, and further to an appropriate overarching, or main, theme. Categorization of the themes and their assigned titles were also audited for accuracy and degree of specificity by the second author, a professor in the same counselling education faculty. Triangulation

of the interview themes with those derived from the lines of inquiry utilized in the larger study was undertaken. The relationships observed were consistent with what was known about the case at that point in the analysis. Furthermore, a member-checking process that asked interview participants to verify researcher-identified themes was completed to ensure trustworthiness and rigour.

<div align="center">RESULTS</div>

The thematic analysis of the interview data generated five main themes and several associated subthemes that captured how this group of counsellors were negotiating the construction of their professional identity within the context of regulatory change. The five main themes were (a) identity challenges and ensuing tensions, (b) facilitators of identity construction, (c) meaningfulness and sense-making at the heart of identity work, (d) counsellors embracing their identity building, and (e) transmitting core elements and dimensionality of counsellor identity. The subthemes related to each of these are noted in Table 1. They will also be discussed in the sections to follow.

Table 1
Main Themes and Subthemes

1. Identity challenges and ensuing tensions
    a) Coping with transition
    b) Identity compatibility and discord
    c) Challenges of regulation
2. Facilitators of identity construction
    a) Validation from others
    b) Mentorship
    c) Precipitating event
3. Meaningfulness and sensemaking at heart of identity work
    a) Congruent values
    b) Good fit with counsellor path
    c) Actualizing life purpose
    d) Desire to help others
4. Counsellors embracing their identity building
    a) Identity construction as a lifelong process
    b) Agency/ownership of identity shaping
    c) Embodiment of counsellor identity
5. Transmitting core elements and dimensionality of counsellor identity
    a) Pondering defining elements
    b) Underscoring a distinct identity
    c) Function of work setting/roles
    d) Multilayered construct

Identity Challenges and Ensuing Tensions

The first theme spoke to the tensions, challenges, and transformative episodes experienced by participants as they navigated through the identity construction process. Emphasis on the current credentialing and professional regulation changes taking place in their province underpinned this theme. This theme had three subthemes: (a) coping with transition, (b) identity compatibility and discord, and (c) challenges of regulation.

Coping with transition. Participants viewed their counsellor identity as an evolving entity with inevitable periods of exhilaration and trepidation that was "exhausting definitely" during the exciting transition moments but worrisome at other change points: "Like sometimes I feel like I am going to burn out and I just started out." A metaphor of a delicate vase was put forward by one participant to illustrate that, as unknowns surfaced about their counsellor identity path (i.e., a concern about meeting qualifications), it made them feel "sort of fragile like material that can break at any time but can also be glued back together at any point." Authenticating identity as a counsellor meant seeing both challenges and possibilities inherent in the construction process.

Identity compatibility and discord. Professional identity transitions and ensuing tensions often arose from dissonance, confusion, task variability, and shifting role expectations. As a participant explained, it was sometimes about striking a reasonable balance or finding "two identities that could be morphed together," namely clinical psychology and their counsellor identity, which they felt at times were philosophically incongruent. For another person, transitioning involved integrating a second counsellor identity as a new role, and felt that the tasks of becoming a supervisor were not just skill acquisition but bringing the identity inward: "You reach a point where you feel comfortable in that, with that identity." Offering a visual metaphor of three-dimensional planes of existence to explain this layering and reconciliation during their identity work, they stated, "I am still that one that is counsellor but … a new layer on top of that has grown, a supervisor, and probably at times I am still feeling like a novice counsellor."

Challenges of regulation. During the interviews, participants shared their frustrations, enthusiasm, and ambivalence for the unfolding professional regulations while they went about their counsellor identity work. Against a backdrop of the pending regulatory college and its unknown implications for counsellors (i.e., title use and scope of practice), some deliberated about altering their career path, while others were taking a step back, saying, "It's not really a strong focus for me" or concluding "that it is not really representing who I am as a counsellor right now." Still others had concerns that proposed changes would remove flexibility when identifying themselves to clients. A participant felt the counsellor title "just really, really fits for me in my sense of identity" and was lamenting its disappearance under the new legislation, while another stated, "For me it will allow [me] to solidify, I think, my identity, my professional identity even more and to be proud to say yeah, I am a psychotherapist."

Another participant described the tensions of negotiating counsellor identity against the backdrop of pending regulation as a kind of "pushback" by counsellors that could strengthen or make them "feel more passionate about hanging onto it," especially when "something is impinging on you or stopping you from getting where you want to go or ignoring you." Another individual also spoke about taking an active response against any marginalization of their counsellor identity that might unfold during regulatory changes through small acts of resistance, stating, "I feel like I would play the role of the psychotherapist but not become the psychotherapist."

Facilitators of Identity Construction

This second theme was about those tangible and instrumental mechanisms that facilitated the construction of professional identity that was a product of a counsellor's efforts or stemmed from some external source. The themes in this grouping point to a few of the resources, opportunities, influencing factors, and precipitating events participants drew upon during their identity work. This main theme was supported by three subthemes: (a) validation from others, (b) mentorship, and (c) a precipitating event.

Validation from others. Receiving confirmation from members of their professional community regarding competency and suitability with the profession fortified the identity construction of some participants. Endorsements from peers, supervisors, and clients were often cited as critical to solidifying a deep sense of counsellor professional identity. One participant recounted how an unfortunate invalidation of their professional identity (i.e., suitability was questioned) took hold, making it "a very rough road because it was almost like starting my construction of my identity from scratch," but endorsement from a different professional peer helped regain lost ground.

Mentorship. Mentors were key facilitators and professional guides for many of the participants as they navigated their counsellor identity. One person recalled how their internship supervisor was instrumental in helping them shape their counsellor identity and transfer counselling knowledge into practice. Another felt very strongly about the role mentors had in their identity construction process and stated,

> I actively seek them out, and it's a way to feel that I am still on track with my professional identity to see models of how they are negotiating those things because they are further along than I am. So, that really helps me figure out where the lines are, I guess and what's possible.

Precipitating event. Certain chance events had power—whether it was a happenstance meeting with a person practicing in the counselling field, an unexpected series of life events tinged with adversity, or encountering a transformative piece of written work … each ignited and fostered the identity work of these participants in some way. For one person, they had found "an ethical and aesthetic home" and resonance with a certain way of being as a counsellor by a happenstance meeting,

while for another it was a special career counselling book that curiously surfaced at points during their professional identity search, bringing that "aha" moment of having found their identity fit.

> It was from going to this course in career development and being introduced into career services, meeting a career counsellor, seeing she had the very same book on her shelf … I didn't know there was a name for this and how did you get to where you are because that makes so much more sense for me.

Meaningfulness and Sensemaking at the Heart of Identity Work

Within this third theme are captured some of the participants' understandings about deeper, internalized, and reflective dimensions that informed the creative and interpretive layers of the identity construction process. As such, these are more than instrumental or functional elements of identity work already covered in the previous grouping; these are decidedly vocational, values-driven, and existential in purpose. The essence of this larger theme was conveyed through four subthemes: (a) values are congruent, (b) good fit with counsellor path, (c) actualizing life purpose, and (d) desire to help others.

Values are congruent. The significance of achieving resonance between personal and professional life values, philosophy, or worldview was part of the dialogue and creative outpouring of the participants. This was often portrayed as a relational ebb and flow between an individual's personal and professional self: "I think it is what resonates with you in terms of constructing that identity." This balance was set by one participant through the intentional orchestration of their workspace using ambient lighting, neutral furnishings, inspirational posters, framed displays of professional credentials, and selected personal items to reflect a warm, welcoming space that communicated professionalism.

The weaving of personal and professional values was not only verbalized but represented in several of the participant diagrams. For some, this took form in overlapping circles or Venn images displaying a constellation of values both personal and professional, or was brought to life through a concept map depicting core beliefs and ways of being. Another diagrammed this relational ebb and flow as a Mobius band looping back and forth to show that "what is coming from the inside and what's outside" was a very "reciprocal movement." Aesthetic coherence by affirming personal and professional values was a prerequisite dimension for another participant, who expressed how it had to do with "your values and your ways of being so that there is more coherence … I think there can be a disjointed jarringness to a person's way of projecting their identity if they don't cultivate, refine it somehow."

Good fit with counsellor path. The search for meaning and resonance within the dimensions of their identity work was a pursuit or a feeling of at least being "on the right path" and truly matched with the counsellor identity. As one participant related,

> I realized that my professional identity, I've seen a lot of it as a journey, a trajectory … to me there are a lot of twists and turns … I have realized, I guess,

that it's a resonation that I am doing the right thing like I am on the right path.

Once the path was entered upon, there was a feeling of being at home, in the right place as it were. Using a very tangible image one person put it this way:

I am where I am supposed to be, and you know when you just kind of have that kind of lock and key fit … where you just feel you are where you should be, that's what I feel right now in terms of my own professional identity.

They concluded by saying, "I don't think you necessarily choose the profession, it chooses you."

Actualizing life purpose. Speaking more extensively on how seeking for meaning and purpose was at the heart of their identity construction, some shared how they felt guided or called to be a counsellor, often citing compelling moments of clarity and deep reflection. Sensing this was "what I am destined to do" and guided by their belief that "I just felt okay, this is my calling," they felt it was a way to actualize their life purpose. Another stated, "Vocation or calling is more central than any term or title would ever be" and related this to the parable of sowing and harvesting wheat: "that parable has often spoken to me about my own identity, my professional identity, about the job that I want and that is in the helping profession … I think it is a calling." Describing it as a blending of identity, vocation, love, and passion, another participant remarked how embracing the counsellor identity had caused moments of deep reflection and shared some thoughts that surfaced while navigating these deeper layers of their professional self:

I guess that's who we are, people and the confessional, and people used to go with their personal problems, but now we have become a profession that's kind of separated from religion or sacredness. But I feel in the therapeutic room and space we create a sense of sacredness that your feelings and your life journey are really honoured … So maybe in another life, if I would have been a priest and that's a life of spiritual vocation, but I don't think many people see us counsellors in that same kind of realm.

Desire to help others. Some participants specifically identified a deep-seated yearning to help and care for others as the prime directive of their altruistic intentions, and they found that the counselling profession met this need. Having a "counselling perspective on helping people" brought together "a mix of one's vision based on desires and goals" that in turn for one counsellor became "one way of realizing those personal values." This desire to help others was recalled by another as "feeling a profound sense of being like a 'carer' or the 'good at listening' or someone people turned to—I can remember that from quite a young age." Looking back over times of financial and personal struggles, a participant talked about how they persisted through the evolution of their counsellor identity and summarized by saying, "You are not just in it for the money, you are in it for the profession and for what you are doing to help other people."

Counsellors Embracing Their Identity Building

This fourth theme was about how participants embraced their counsellor identity work as a lifelong project and took ownership of being active agents in becoming professionals. Identity construction was in their view an emergent, fluid process during which a more profound sense of whom they were as counsellors became ingrained or embodied. Three subthemes were related to this theme: (a) identity construction as a lifelong process, (b) agency/ownership of identity shaping, and (c) embodiment of counsellor identity.

Identity construction as a lifelong process. Many viewed and depicted their counsellor identity as a work in progress, often uneven and emergent with a certain tentativeness, so it was always open to some finishing touches, "I would definitely say there is a sense of mastery at some point, but I don't think the professional identity will ever really be settled." Some spoke about ongoing refinement and identity enrichment, declaring that their counsellor identity was "in constant evolution" or action mode "like a little atom-type thing." The idea of growing and reworking their counsellor identity as a lifelong project was captured in multiple metaphors that participants offered, such as the working of a sculptor: "You know when you are making pottery and shaping it, and it builds and that as time goes it dries and hardens … but it could still break," or the image of a spiral: "Like DNA it changes the way mutations can happen, and you know, the way it can combine with other spirals." Others described the lifelong process of their identity construction as "growing more layers," a "chameleon identity kind of thing … I think that it has to be very fluid and will evolve with time," "something "amorphous" so they were "always adapting, growing, solidifying … I don't think I want it to end … its like there is always more room to grow."

Agency/ownership of identity shaping. Another way participants went about embracing their identity work was by being the agent of this shaping process. Some were particularly emphatic that the design and choices were theirs, saying "I feel very much like I am in control of my professional identity, but that is only because … I choose to take ownership of that identity, and in counselling we do, I like to think, choose the identity," while another stated, "Well, it is definitely my life project, and it is part of who I am that I like to make my own choices." One stated,

> I think I have always been proactive about my professional creation and identity formation … I am going to find out other things that help bring that professionalism and identity, but I am going to be an agent of change in my own way.

Another participant defended ownership of her career counsellor identity by declaring, "I decided to hold onto it, so I really feel like I am the constructor of my own identity."

Embodiment of counsellor identity. Participants described a deep identification and internalization of their counsellor identity at points during the construction and navigation of their professional self:

> I think like you really think a lot about it at first and then you just feel it … you know it is like you just internalize it … it is integrated as a part of who you are, and it is just something that you feel and embody.

Thinking ahead to a potential move toward higher academic pursuits, one counsellor envisioned how in time "a situation will probably trigger something that might kick-start; it might kick-start that core sense of I used to be a counsellor … it would be just like riding a bike … I would react and respond as a counsellor." Upon further reflection, they expressed how there would be

> a sense of loss and some sad feeling about the prospect of losing that identity right because a part of me it is ingrained, it's actually a component of my self-concept … it is not just temporary, it's permanent … it's a piece of a puzzle that makes up your self-concept.

Transmitting Core Elements and Dimensionality of Counsellor Identity

The fifth and final theme put a spotlight on how participants described, delineated, and conveyed fundamental aspects of their professional identity. Challenges of clarifying and differentiating counsellor identity within certain environments (i.e., specialized practice, professional communities, workplace settings) or change contexts (i.e., pending regulatory legislation) surfaced. There were four subthemes: (a) pondering defining elements, (b) underscoring a distinct identity, (c) function of work setting/roles, and (d) multilayered construct.

Pondering defining elements. Being able to transmit core elements and dimensions of their counsellor identity was compounded at times by confusing titles or misinterpretations: "Sometimes it needs a qualifier [and] sometimes it doesn't, 90% of the time people understand what counsellor means." Finding a way to clarify who they were as counsellors was quite relevant given the pending regulatory changes to definitional parameters, designations, roles, titles, and restrictions on scope of practice, either newly demarcated or still under review. Some were not concerned about proposed designations because the elements that defined them as counsellors were deep-seated:

> I don't think it is going to change what I do on a day-to-day basis, and that is what forms my identity … what I actually do sitting down with people, listening and all that stuff is not going to change anything—whether I have a badge, or it is tattooed on me.

Underscoring a distinct identity. Participants sought ways to underscore how their counsellor identity was unique, and for some this meant building a reputation in their community of practice while others sought opportunities to emphasize their philosophical roots:

> I love what the counsellor identity represents in terms of that to me it's that identification with the basic goodness of people and the humanity of people with more of a positive psychology approach as opposed to the broken person on the psychotherapist side.

A few participants highlighted how it was a combination of counselling philosophy and client interactions that shaped their identity as a counsellor. This was the explanation offered by one person: "Counsellor to me just sounds more approachable … I think it sounds a little bit less I don't know, medicalized or something." The features that set the counsellor identity apart were grounded in the ethics, philosophy, and therapeutic practices of their profession, and in one person's estimation, "That's professional identity, that's a really strong professional identity."

Function of work setting/roles. The influence of the work setting, roles, and job tasks on counsellor identity varied in degrees among the study participants. For one participant, the growth of their professional identity had some connection to the job or role, but the relational bond with clients, coworkers, and the social environment surrounding their workplace also contributed:

> I really felt I have developed a relationship with the community. They may not all be my clients, I may see their children, but they are part of knowing this, um, larger view of me as a professional. So, I guess there is also a community involved that helps identify that professional identity. Not only am I identifying but people identify me as a professional.

Another participant stated, "The job being done is the big factor in building the identity," and in their current counselling position, several more administrative and supervisory tasks made it difficult at times to preserve their counsellor identity.

Multilayered construct. Counsellor identity was considered multifaceted, and participants offered their accounts of how "there are lots of layers" and "so many different aspects and I would say they intertwine and wrap but there is this core movement." Others described a "founding identity, my foundation of everything that I built more identities on top of it." This ability to increase the dimensionality of their counsellor identity was something a participant discovered in other counsellors: "I think what I like about it too is that people who are in this field are bridge people … they pivot, and they can switch gears … it was the fact that they had blended all those realms." Adding the layers was not always a seamless process, and the dilemma of reconciling these was captured in a participant's metaphor of light and shadow: "There is a sense of one identity dimming whereas the other is kind of getting lit up … or getting a spotlight in that sense or expanding or shrinking … or one will overshadow the other."

<div align="center">DISCUSSION</div>

The purpose of our study was to understand the dynamics of counsellor professional identity construction during an exogenous change event. We looked specifically at how counsellors negotiated their professional identity amid changes to the remit of their profession that were slowly being ushered in by regulatory legislation. Our findings indicated that counsellors drew upon several facilitative factors during their identity construction. These factors acted as catalysts during their identity work and included mentorship, validation from others (i.e., personal

and professional peers), and the opportunities afforded by precipitating events. They also nurtured their counsellor identity through sensemaking and a search for meaning. Respondents verbalized and visually portrayed how altruistic intentions, actualizing life purpose, realizing strongly held values, being agentic, transmitting defining elements, and approaching the construction of their counsellor identity constituted a lifelong project. Many of these underlying motivations and facilitating elements informing the identity construction of respondents in this study (e.g., altruistic values, being a "carer," mentorship, self-actualization) were consistent with evidence found in previous studies on counsellor identity (Dollarhide & Oliver, 2014; Gazzola & Smith, 2007; Gazzola et al., 2010).

Evidence of internalization of counsellor identity, which was considered a multilayered construct incorporating both personal and professional elements, was also consistent with previous studies (Alves & Gazzola, 2013; Gazzola et al., 2010). However, for participants in this study, the transmission of a professional identity and needing to distinguish their counsellor identity while reconciling the incoming psychotherapist title created a challenge that brought various responses. Although some welcomed the potential benefits of acquiring a regulated title (i.e., psychotherapist), others expressed loss for the counsellor title but believed their counsellor identity would prevail. Although these were early days in the unfolding regulatory agenda, participants expressed a deep loyalty to their counsellor identity because it more closely embodied the values, meaning, altruistic focus, and therapeutic or relational way of being that had called them to this work.

Our findings also suggested the uncertainty associated with the impending regulatory changes created varying levels of tension and disquiet for student, novice, and experienced counsellors. These included frustrations stemming from uncertainty about the status of their profession, ambiguity about designations or title use, fears of marginalization as counsellors, cautious optimism for status/ economic gains, indecision about continuing or abandoning a counsellor career path, passive trust while awaiting changes, and trepidation that a rebranding might diminish identification flexibility.

When faced with similar exogenous change events (e.g., mergers, institutional restructuring, shifting marketplace, health care reform) in other institutional, organizational, or professional settings, many responses to threats or uncertainty that arise during an indeterminate transitional period also surfaced during the regulatory change context of this study (Chreim, 2002; Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, & Thomas, 2010; Corley & Gioia, 2004). Role ambiguity, identity dissonance, temporary destabilization, identity aggregation, compartmentalization, and use of transitional identities have been identified in previous studies examining the tensions associated with the identity construction processes (Ibarra, 1999; Kreiner et al., 2006; Pratt & Foreman, 2000; Pratt et al., 2006). Our findings also showed evidence of these processes.

Constructs identified in the extant literature on identity work were evident among study participants' accounts. For example, the use of sensemaking processes of reframing change as growth moments, employing self-questioning or reflec-

tion to manage disequilibrium brought by identity disruption, and enactment via identity markers as they strategically positioned office décor were each noted. Participants employed customization by enriching, deepening, and refining their identity by layering or lifelong learning; however, patching and splinting were not as evident. Identification, another construct central to identity construction, was also apparent in the sense of affinity with being and belonging to the counselling profession. Each one of these findings contributes to the growing understanding of identity construction dynamics by providing real-time accounts, capturing elements that surface during a suspended or liminal period, offering insights into a unique change context (legislated regulation of a profession), and featuring a counsellor perspective on professional identity transition (Clark et al., 2010; Ibarra, 2007; Pratt et al., 2006).

From the experiential accounts shared by this group of counsellors during their interviews and their rich descriptions enhanced by metaphors or drawings, another interesting finding emerged. Tensions arising from the necessity to safeguard counsellor identity against a creeping impingement or marginalization when legislated regulation took hold were considered unsettling, but for some these became transformative. Small acts of resistance and a readiness to "push back" in response to perceived threats to a cherished counsellor identity during the uncertainty of transition brought out an empowering element or consolidating force for some that activated an impassioned response (e.g., "wearing" but not "becoming" the prospective identity). This use of covert resistance in the face of identity threat by participants corresponds with discussions in the counselling literature on taking a stance of "principled non-compliance" (House, 2008) to defend core features of counsellor identity (i.e., humanistic values).

These findings resonate and add to existing research on uncertainty reduction and entitativity (i.e., group solidarity) that has demonstrated how prolonged and unresolved identity uncertainty can sharpen or intensify convictions by degrees (Hogg et al., 2007). The central premise of uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2000, 2007) is that individuals experiencing feelings of uncertainty that infringe on their values, beliefs, attitudes, and overall sense of self are strongly motivated to reduce this state, which "can be an exhilarating challenge that delivers a sense of satisfaction and mastery in its resolution, or it can be stressful and anxiety provoking, making us feel powerless" (Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2010, p. 73). Our findings confirmed a similar range of responses to the uncertainty-identity challenge (Hogg et al., 2010) from an unsettling transition to transformation.

Limitations

The findings of this study should be viewed in light of certain inherent limitations. Our ability to include counsellors from across the significantly large province of Ontario posed a geographic limitation. Despite efforts to accommodate time and travel requirements, the distance may have been prohibitory, perhaps rendering our findings less transferable. Furthermore, any transferability of these findings to counsellors undertaking the construction of their professional identity in

a smaller provincial jurisdiction or where regulatory frameworks are at a different stage also warrant caution, given that their experience could differ significantly from participants in this unique case study.

The interviews utilized two creative but challenging data collection instruments (i.e., participant diagramming and a metaphor request) that imposed possible methodological limitations by being art-based, reflective, and time-bound. Some participants may have felt their responses to the diagramming and metaphor work were truncated (e.g., not enough art-based mediums) or restricted by their artistic comfort level. As well, the time allotted for reflection while developing these materials may have interfered with their ability to transmit their responses to their satisfaction. Although efforts were made to put respondents at ease by assuring them their artistic ability was not under assessment, a residual hesitancy may have remained.

Implications

Results from the experiential accounts of our respondents suggest that professional counsellors approach their identity construction quite purposefully and draw upon unique constellations of personal values, life events, happenstance moments, a sense of vocation, and a measure of fortitude when destabilizing forces cycle. While Alves and Gazzola (2013) and Gazzola et al. (2010) reported similar findings, our study uncovered a few unique elements. For example, our participants were surprised how much identity crafting and negotiation they were facilitating moment-by-moment just outside of their awareness.

Having an opportunity to explore and share these insights during the study became a reassurance that identity work was happening, and some expressed a desire to extend this professional becoming beyond the immediate experience. Building on their suggestions, it would seem fitting to prompt some formal (e.g., topic in supervision, peer-to-peer dialogues) or informal (e.g., reflective practices, creative work) occasions within practice settings, training programs, or supervision to further this identity work. Being more aware of what has gone into building their counsellor identity ensures individuals can transmit their unique skills, explain guiding values, and operationalize counsellor attributes while interacting with clients and allied professions. This is consequential for the longevity of the profession but, equally so, for the life-career fulfillment of the practitioner.

Increasing competency as a reflective practitioner has merit, and further research into the dynamic aspects of identity construction within the regulatory context or another exogenous change event can help to build interdisciplinary scholarship. However, results of this study highlighted an apparent paradox that has implications for counsellor training and supervision. There was a sense of agency and even some rumblings of push-back to safeguard core aspects of the counsellor identity among the participants while they were still cognizant of the necessity for adaptation to meet external realities of professional identity shifts (i.e., health care reform).

Unfortunately, this conundrum also faces counselling training programs in Ontario that have nurtured the uniqueness of counsellor identity but now face provincial accreditation within a psychotherapist identity frame. The formation of curricula to ensure that counsellor identity remains richly supported is challenging, and it is not clear how counsellor educators will approach this dualism. It also reposts previous concerns and suggestions that counsellor educators holding a solid counsellor identity are essential for transmitting that professional identity to new counsellors (Hawley & Calley, 2009). Study participants at all three levels of experience spoke to the realities of these repercussions, expressing discouragement about additional qualifications, concern over employment prospects, and thoughts about career path redirection.

It is evident from the results of this case study that counsellors are adept at "pivoting" and calling forth their protean self during periods of uncertainty because they are "bridge people." Their counsellor identity has strong moorings because it is grounded in ways of being that are resonant with their values, fulfills a desire for meaning and sensemaking, provides a kind of "lock and key fit," meets a vocational calling, and verifies they are on the "right path" in pursuing their desire to be in the helping profession. Sustaining the narrative thread (Ibarra, 2007) of their counsellor identity would appear from our findings to be falling quite heavily on the shoulders of individual counsellors at times. It would seem beneficial to have the CCPA play a more active role in upholding and promoting Canadian counsellor identity as it has been prioritized by other national associations for counsellors (American Counseling Association, 2009). Titles and activities within the remit of counsellors could be quite inconsistent as the trend toward statutory regulation moves across the country, so a strong national counselling association could prove instrumental as a unifying force.

Note

1. Data collection for the larger study included a demographic questionnaire, document review, virtual focus group, and a graphic elicitation process to furnish multiple lines of inquiry.

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