Professional Identity Development: A Grounded Theory of Transformational Tasks of New Counselors

Donna M. Gibson, Colette T. Dollarhide, & Julie M. Moss

Professional identity development is an important professional issue. Examining the lived experiences of counselors-in-training (CITs), the authors used grounded theory methodology to describe the transformational tasks that are required for professional identity development. Tasks include finding a personal definition of counseling, internalizing responsibility for professional growth, and developing a systemic identity—all simultaneously manifesting as students progress from focus on experts to self-validation. Counselor educators can facilitate movement through these transformational tasks by helping CITs to increase self-evaluating, self-motivating, and self-locating within a professional community.

Professional identity is at the forefront of national awareness within the counseling profession. Its importance is clear: The first principle in the American Counseling Association's (2009) 20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling is "Sharing a common professional identity is critical for counselors" (para. 2). Multiple ways to improve the collective professional identity of counselors exist through unity, legislation, licensure, communication, and self-advocacy (Cashwell, Kleist, & Scofield, 2009).

Counselor professional identity is the integration of professional training with personal attributes in the context of a professional community (Nugent & Jones, 2009). Contemporary definitions of professional identity seem to revolve around three themes: self-labeling as a professional, integration of skills and attitudes as a professional, and a perception of context in a professional community. According to Reisetter et al. (2004), professional identity is the view of self as a professional plus competence as a professional, resulting in congruence between personal worldview and professional view. Integration culminates in envisioning oneself as part of the professional community. Similarly, Auxier, Hughes, and Kline (2003) stated that professional identity is equal to the therapeutic self, which is a combination of professional (roles, decisions, ethics) and personal selves (values, morals, perceptions). The therapeutic self creates frames of reference (professional contexts) for counseling roles and decisions, attitudes concerning responsibilities and ethics, modes of thinking, and patterns of problem solving.

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With integration of personal attributes and professional training, the individual contextualizes the new identity in a professional community in which the "self as professional" is tested via feedback from others, the third component of professional identity. This is a dynamic process for the evolving counselor as new input is compared with previous views, evaluated, and internalized or rejected (Auxier et al., 2003; O'Byrne & Rosenberg, 1998; Reisetter et al., 2004). The professional community helps the new professional maintain contact with the standards, expectations, and rules of the profession.

As can be inferred from these definitions, the professional identity development process is both *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal*. The intrapersonal process that results in professional identity development was described by Auxier et al. (2003) and Brott and Myers (1999) as individuation that results from a cycle of autonomy and dependence during professional skills acquisition. In the first phase of the cycle, new professionals rely on external authority figures and experts (program faculty members) for conceptual learning, experiential learning, and external evaluation during their graduate programs. In the second phase, new professionals encounter authorities in the profession (supervisors) and experience feedback on professional skills acquired during formal education. With this feedback, new professionals move toward an internal locus of evaluation as they examine, process, and internalize external evaluations (Auxier et al., 2003; Brott & Myers, 1999). In the final phase, the new professional is able to self-evaluate, integrating experience with theory to merge personal and professional identities. Professional identity is solidified when the locus of evaluation becomes internal (Auxier et al., 2003; Brott & Myers, 1999; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1995).

The interpersonal aspects of the professional identity development process involve the professional community and its role in shaping the new professional. O'Byrne and Rosenberg (1998) proposed a sociological perspective on identity development, in which the professional acculturation process emerges through guided participation with the professional community. In this context, new professionals are socialized in the language of therapy; learn what is expected and what they can expect; and learn to behave as "native speakers" in the new culture through observation, supervision, consultation, and practice. Dollarhide and Miller (2006) summarized this process as immersion in a professional culture through which one learns professionally appropriate attitudes, values, modes of thinking, and strategies for problem solving.

Researchers into professional identity have examined several facets of professional identity development in which personal or professional "fit" are examined. Woodside, Oberman, Cole, and Carruth (2007) found that practicum-level trainees sought to verify their career direction and expressed self-doubt regarding learning to be a counselor, which supports the inter- and intrapersonal examination that occurs with professional identity. In a qualitative study conducted by Howard, Inman, and Altman (2006), the critical incidents experienced by counselor trainees in a practicum class were examined. They found

nearly one third of all the critical incidents reported by participants involved professional identity issues: the counselor's role, the career of counseling, and one's professional identity in the context of training. These respondents could be conceptualized as struggling to integrate their personal and professional selves. In these studies, the researchers' focus on practicum-only students does not provide a full developmental view of the identity formation process.

Researchers who examined issues across the training period focused on other aspects of professional identity. In a quantitative study, Busacca and Wester (2006) examined the career concerns of counselor trainees, specifically professional development concerns, which were defined as "broadening one's sense of the profession and identity as a counseling professional" (p. 182). Nearly 83% of participants reported that professional development concerns were of *considerable importance* or *great importance* (Busacca & Wester, 2006, p. 184). To examine professional identity in a multicultural context, Nelson and Jackson (2003) conducted a qualitative study of professional identity development among Hispanic counselors-in-training (CITs). They found themes consistent with those of other studies (i.e., knowledge, personal growth, and experiential learning) and other themes they felt were unique to the Hispanic population because of cultural factors (i.e., emphasis on relationships, a strong sense of accomplishment, high personal costs, and varying perceptions of the counseling profession). The findings from both studies would suggest that counselor trainees were aware of and concerned about their evolving professional identity as a pressing training concern. However, neither of these studies was designed to articulate the professional identity development process.

Without awareness of the process, intentional professional identity development during counselor education may be lacking. During the training process, counselor educators monitor the progress of trainees in the development of professional identity (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2009). If the new professional is not successfully integrated into the professional culture and does not develop a well-defined sense of identity, role confusion may result (Erikson, 1994; Studer, 2007), which may impair the counselor's ability to function ethically as a professional. Although descriptions of the professional identity development process exist (Auxier et al., 2003; Brott & Myers, 1999; O'Byrne & Rosenberg, 1998; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1995), no overview exists of the process that was informed by the trainees themselves and from trainees at different developmental levels.

This study was designed to provide a theory of professional identity development from entry into the program through the completion of internship, as described by the trainees. Professional identity development is highlighted at nodal points in counselor training (before course work, before practicum, before internship, and at graduation) to articulate a grounded theory of the construction of professional identity. With a holistic theory of the *professional identity development process* (defined as the successful integration of personal attributes

and professional training in the context of a professional community), counselor education programs can be refined to promote professional identity formation and professional induction.

Method

Overview

As researchers into the professional identity development of counselor trainees, we sought to understand the professional identity development process through constructivist lenses (Creswell, 2003), resulting in the selection of a qualitative research method (Merriam, 1998). Specifically, we selected the grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) using focus group data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) to explore and articulate the construction of professional identity as described by the trainees themselves at nodal points in their training, thus allowing the development of an integrated theory of this phenomenon. To capture the lived experiences of trainees at each stage of training, we used stratified purposeful sampling (Miles & Huberman, as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2006). We selected this strategy to highlight subgroups that would animate the developmental progression in the construction of professional identity.

Researchers

Because qualitative research consists of ongoing dialogue and discovery in a meaning-rich environment, both researchers and respondents merit description. We, the researchers, are women, ages 34 to 52; two are counselor educators with 25 combined years of professorial and research experience, and one is a doctoral student in counselor education. The two lead researchers (the first and second authors) have long-term interest in the topic of professional identity development and are working on multiple research projects on the topic. Biases among the researchers include the belief that professional identity is important, that professional identity develops on the basis of training experiences, and that the depth of professional identity integration can significantly influence the quality of counseling services. We held no a priori assumptions concerning the nature or timing of professional identity development except in broad terms, and we held no assumptions that the two program tracks or that the two campuses from which the participants were derived would vary from each other in ways that would influence the constructed theory.

Participants

The participants in this study were from the campuses of the lead researchers: one in the Southeast and one in the Midwest. Human subjects approval was granted. Participants were recruited from the programs of the lead researchers in an attempt to capture diverse perspectives in terms of region and professional focus: the school counseling emphasis on the Midwest campus and the marriage, family, and couples counseling (MFC) emphasis on the Southeast campus.

Through announcements in counseling student electronic mailing lists, we invited all students at each of the four training levels (before course work, before practicum, before internship, and at graduation) to participate in the study. We informed all responding volunteers of the days, times, and locations of the focus group meetings, which we scheduled to allow all volunteers to participate. From the school counseling program on the Midwest campus, more than 60% of the small full-time cohort (12 to 15 students for each cohort) volunteered to participate, resulting in 21 participants. From the MFC program on the Southeast campus, more than 40% of the full- and part-time noncohort model students participated, resulting in 22 participants. The total number of participants was 43. In Table 1, the numbers of students per type of program (school or MFC), region (Midwest or Southeast), and training level are provided.

During the informed consent discussion, we informed volunteers that no rewards and no penalties would be assigned on the basis of participant status. Because the lead researchers are professors, participants were also in classes with the researchers; however, the context of the research was not discussed in classes to reduce dual relationship issues between the researchers and the participants. We managed existing dual relationships by rigorous separation of course-related and research efforts. Each participant signed an informed consent form. We did not collect demographic information to reduce participant concerns regarding professor–student power differential; however, the lead researchers confirmed that more than 25% of the participants represented various diversity constructs in terms of gender, cultural identification, and sexual orientation.

As previously described, we sent e-mail invitations to all counselor education students on each campus in the four training levels targeted in this study: trainees who had been accepted in the program but who had not yet started classes (i.e., before course work level or new CITs), trainees who had completed more than 80% of courses but who had not started practicum (i.e., before practicum level or prepracticum CITs), trainees who had completed practicum but had not yet started internship (i.e., before internship level or preinternship CITs), and trainees who

TABLE 1

Focus Group Participants by Program, Region, and Training Level

| | Trainees | | | |
| | School (Midwest) | MFC (Southeast) | Total | No. of Focus Groups |
Training Level				
Before course work	4	7	11	2
Before practicum	7	0	7	1
Before internship	4	8	12	2
At graduation	6	7	13	2
Total	21	22	43	7

Note. MFC = marriage, family, and couples counseling.

had completed internship but had not yet graduated (i.e., at gradation level or pregraduation CITs). Homogeneous groups, by training level, took part in focus groups at each university. We conducted a total of seven focus groups (one campus did not have an identifiable cohort who fit the before practicum definition; see Table 1). Because we gathered all data in 1 academic year, these four groups represented discrete groups; no participant was interviewed in more than one focus group.

Data Collection

We decided that focus group data collection would be better than individual interviews to capture the collective experience of the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 44). As described by Marshall and Rossman (2006), focus groups allow participants to reflect on each other's comments while constructing their own responses. The size of each focus group was four to eight participants to maximize each participant's input (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). We designed the focus group questions to encourage respondents to articulate their history, present status, and future needs relative to professional identity (see Appendix for focus group questions). Informed by the literature (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 51), we designed the questions to elicit discussion regarding the respondents' definition of counseling and professional identity, prior professional identity, and current professional identity.

We also asked respondents to discuss what they felt they needed to progress to "the next level" of professional identity, what has contributed most to their professional identity and why, what more they needed to learn, and how they will know they are a professional counselor. After each focus group, the third researcher (third author) created verbatim transcripts from audiotapes. After receipt of the transcripts, we examined the data for redundancy and saturation to decide whether additional focus groups were needed. Because of content consistency and redundancy within each training level, we decided that additional focus groups were unnecessary.

Data Analysis

We communicated frequently at each stage of data analysis to co-construct themes through discussion, negotiation, exploration, and consensus building. Through this open communication process, we worked to reduce researcher bias through openly challenging each other and ourselves with any conclusions. Initially, we focused the analysis on the potential differences between school and MFC CITs. To examine this issue, each researcher read the transcripts in the open coding process, looking for the concepts, categories, properties, and dimensions that characterized each program track (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This was done by line-by-line analysis and the careful reading of each phrase used by respondents to capture nuances of meaning. We agreed that participants did not differ from each other on the basis of their training specialties.

After we resolved that no differences existed between school and MFC CITs, we began again the line-by-line open coding process, but focused on coding for differences on the basis of training level. Because we conceptualized the development of professional identity as a continuum (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we examined the transcripts of the before course work and at graduation training levels focus groups and coded these transcripts for concepts and categories to "anchor" the ends of the continuum. Once we identified these anchors, we coded the transcripts of the remaining two training levels (i.e., before practicum and before internship). At the end of the open coding process, we discovered response categories that transcended training levels and discussed these to arrive at consensus at this stage before moving to axial coding. In axial coding, we refined the categories by the examination of differences between and similarities among the four training levels, simultaneously noting process indices that would be used in the construction of the grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Finally, we used *selective coding* (i.e., "the integration of data, concepts, and categories into a coherent theory"; Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 144) to synthesize the various categories and process indices into an abstract theory that captured the essential story told by those in the focus groups. The final integration process highlighted the developmental progression that transcended program or campus and occurred over several conversations among the researchers, resulting in the discovery of progression both overall and within the transformational tasks identified with the axial coding process.

Criteria of soundness of the study and its analyses address the four canons of quality (Lincoln & Guba, as cited in Kline, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. *Credibility* is addressed in this study through transparency in the design and implementation of the study and in-depth description of the analyses. *Transferability* is enhanced in this study through the use of multiple researchers reflecting on their own professional identities and the use of multiple campuses with multiple training emphasis areas. In addition, we repeatedly challenged each other to verify conceptual triangulation between emerging themes and the literature on professional identity. Finally, we used a broad, diverse participant pool to capture perspectives from multiple lived experiences that was designed to enrich the theory as it was developed. *Dependability* and *confirmability* in this study are enhanced by articulation of the researchers' biases and assumptions and the use of frequent conversation, collective analysis, and consensus so that researcher biases were minimized.

Results

The results of the interviews with the focus groups yielded a developmental grounded theory of the transformation of counselor professional identity in CITs, as depicted in Figure 1. In this theory, three developmental tasks exist that describe the work that must be accomplished
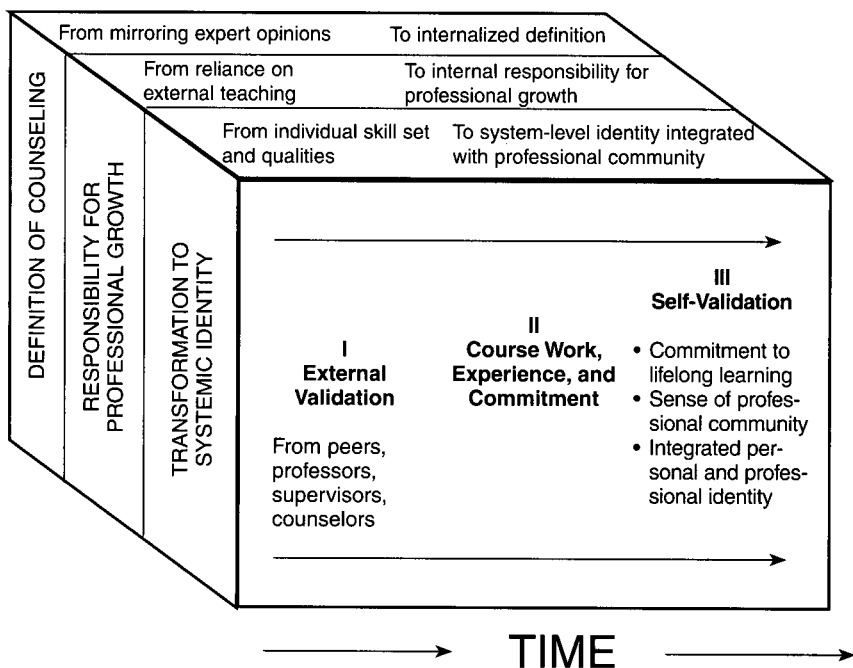
FIGURE 1

Transformational Tasks: A Process View of Professional Counselor Identity Development

to transform identity. In each of these tasks, the same transformational process is evident: a movement from external validation, through course work, experience, and commitment, to self-validation. We label this theory Transformational Tasks and present it within two distinct areas: the transformational tasks and the transformational process across time and experience. For consistency in reporting the results, we use four terms: *new CITs* to refer to those accepted into programs but who have not yet begun classes (i.e., before course work training level), *prepracticum CITs* to refer to those who have completed a majority of courses but who have not had practicum (i.e., before practicum training level), *preinternship CITs* to refer to those between practicum and internship (i.e., before internship training level), and *pregraduation CITs* to refer to those between internship and graduation (i.e., at gradation training level).

Transformational Tasks

The three distinct transformational tasks define areas of development that constitute professional identity: definition of counseling, responsibility for professional growth, and transformation to systemic identity (i.e., listed on the side of the cube in Figure 1). CITs at different stages in their respective counselor education programs described their perspectives and experiences in terms of these specific areas related to professional identity development. The transformational

process across time became evident in each task, as we observed the progression from a reliance on expert teaching and external validation to internalized responsibility and self-validation.

Definition of counseling. Professional identity evolves from the individual's definition of the work of the profession. To examine how the definition of the profession changed over time for CITs, we asked all participants to define counseling in three ways: how experts defined counseling, how the public defined counseling, and how the individual CIT defined counseling. Remarkably, all of the CITs acknowledged that the public is uninformed or holds a negative perception of counseling, as represented by this CIT's comment: "[Counseling is] like a taboo subject, people don't want to talk about it or they want to keep it hidden." At all levels, they described the public's inability to differentiate among professions or to know what these professionals actually do with clients. For example, a CIT reported that the public perceives "a counselor is an advice giver, somebody that is there but nobody really knows what they do. [The public doesn't] know the differences between counselor and therapist or psychiatrist or psychologist." Despite these inaccurate public impressions of the work of a counselor, all participants expressed commitment to continue in their chosen profession.

Developmental progression became evident when examining definitions of counseling between new CITs and preinternship and pregraduation CITs. Specifically, almost identical definitions of counseling were offered when new CITs described expert definitions of counseling and their own definitions of counseling. For example, one new CIT reported his or her own individual definition of counseling as "facilitating growth through building on the clients' strengths rather than weaknesses," which is representative of many definitions that all CITs provided for an expert definition of counseling. However, personal definitions of counseling changed for CITs as they progressed through their programs; preinternship and pregraduation CITs had personal definitions of counseling that differed from those attributed to the experts. The individual definitions became representative of a more internalized view of counseling instead of a mirroring of expert opinions. Preinternship and pregraduation CITs defined counseling more in terms of the relationship between the counselor and client and how the counselor empowers the client in the process. One pregraduation CIT reported that counseling is a "supportive relationship where you seek someone out to help empower them to make their own decisions and gain insight." Another stated, "You are walking through life with people, a lot of times at very tender moments. Still I don't take that lightly. We have to be on our game affecting people's life. I take responsibility for the work I do." A third said, "There is a feeling inside me I get when I think that I am a counselor or a counselor is somebody who empowers people and helps them." Although new CITs reflected reliance on experts' definitions early in the program, this evolved into a personalized understanding of and experiencing the relationship inherent in counseling for pregraduation CITs. Furthermore, the pregraduation CITs expressed awareness and acceptance of responsibility for client empowerment later in training.

Responsibility for professional growth. Professional identity emerges as a result of training experiences, so we asked participants what they perceived as meaningful in their development of professional identity experienced during their training. Furthermore, we asked them to reflect on what they needed to move forward in their professional identity development. We found that this was the second transformational task: how CITs viewed the source of professional growth at specific points of the program. Overall, new and prepracticum CITs reported a strong reliance on external authorities to provide learning experiences and materials. This included specific course information and experiences with clients, as stated by one CIT who reported needing "to learn more about counseling theories." Needs were described by another as "more knowledge and more opportunities to learn the skill and practice and a lot of application in the classroom setting," and eloquently summarized by a third: "I need for my professors to take a chip out of their brain and put it in mine so that I can literally just learn everything."

In contrast, preinternship and pregraduation CITs reported needs that they themselves had to meet to make progress in their professional identities. This included finding resources that would aid them in their work as counselors, such as going to conferences, becoming a supervisor, or learning to balance life tasks. In general, this group of CITs reflected a more internal initiation of learning goals that included flexible thinking and acceptance of not knowing all the answers but knowing how to find them. As stated by a pregraduation CIT,

> [We are] learning to expect the unexpected and to know that a lot of situations are going to arise and you aren't going to know how to handle it perfectly and you know it might not go smoothly but to just know where you can look for resources.

Another stated, "I think being a professional involves also being a member of professional organizations that will keep you sharpened in your skills and keep you aware of what is going on currently in your field." This CIT added, "I think too part of that fluid piece, that's the word, is being a lifelong learner that the profession of counselors will change and it has changed." For these participants, the transformation progresses from reliance on others to self-reliance and self-motivation relative to professional identity development.

Transformation to systemic identity. Professional identity has been shown to reflect an internal locus of evaluation (Auxier et al., 2003; O'Byrne & Rosenberg, 1998; Reisetter et al., 2004), so we posed questions that explored how the CITs defined their own professional identities and examined responses for locus of evaluation relative to feedback from the professional community. This resulted in the third developmental task: how the CITs perceived their professional identities relative to their professional community. New and prepracticum CITs focused on their individual skills and qualities as defining their professional identities, relying on professional criteria to define professional identity such as certification, licensure, or job title. This is evident in this statement from a new CIT: "I guess I would define professional identity as your total expertise, credentials, and affilia-

tions that the counselor brings in with his clients." In addition, many new CITs continued to rely on external validation, as one new CIT indicated tht he or she experienced a sense of professional identity after "receiving positive feedback from some I have helped."

In contrast, preinternship and pregraduation CITs began to use more systemic thinking in terms of their professional identities as counselors. Specifically, their own identities had started to become integrated with the professional community of counseling. For example, one preinternship CIT reported, "I think [professional identity] is an integration of the book knowledge, the work that you currently do, the work that you will do in the future, and how you contribute to the profession." Another stated,

> Throughout not only the course work but internship especially, well practicum and internship, I have seen how much one person can truly have an impact not just on one other person but an entire system. That system being the school, that system being the peer network of whomever you are working with individually. . . . So, from start it was one person to the end. It is a team, and it is everyone, and we are here for the same mission and the same purpose. And we need to garner that support and be that encouraging force for everyone.

This systemic focus allows the new professional to engage in a community of professional support, which can increase the successful induction of the new counselor into the profession. Yet this change in perspective does not happen in isolation; it happens across time and experience for each of the transformational tasks.

Transformation Process Across Time and Experience

Professional identity developmental tasks of CITs were evident in the focus groups and are depicted on the side and top of the cube in Figure 1. The transformational process is depicted on the face of the cube. The process starts with a need for external validation, proceeds with early counseling experiences, is powered by the commitment of the CIT, and arrives at self-validation and membership in the professional community that is integrated with identity as a counselor.

The first stage of the transformational process is external validation. Although the need for external validation was a hallmark for new and prepracticum CITs, this need did occur at times for preinternship and pregraduation CITs, reinforcing the phenomenological and fluid nature of the professional identity development process. However, a strong theme of new and prepracticum CITs was a need for reassurance from colleagues, professors, supervisors, and other experts. This included awareness of the need to learn more from course work; one new CIT reported that he or she needed "more reassurance from colleagues and more opportunities to learn." Preinternship and pregraduation CITs reported a lesser degree of need for learning opportunities in the classroom and more of a need for supervision in their practice, as noted by one intern: "We have group supervision, we have individual supervision, we have [school] counselors that are also there and provide job shadowing."

Because the majority of counselor education programs have simultaneous course work with practice until CITs reach culminating experiences in practicum and internship, it was not surprising to observe the course work, experience, and commitment process develop over time. Prepracticum and preinternship CITs began to use terminology of "lifelong learner" more often in the interviews and to describe aspects of counseling that they learned in practice rather than in the classroom. For example, one prepracticum CIT summarized, "Know you're a lifelong learner and realizing you don't know it all, don't have all the answers, but being willing to work with colleagues."

Finally, the process arrives at a point in which preinternship and pregraduation CITs began to self-validate rather than depend on external sources of validation. More important, these CITs were able to view their counselor identities as part of the professional community of counselors. One practicum CIT described his or her identity in connection with the profession: "I think also it has to do with how you identify with the profession. How your values correlate with your profession. It's how you identify with the profession and those around you." Another intern stated it this way:

> I would say: How do I want my peers to see me? People who are also in the profession but also in education, and then people who, you know, I run into who haven't seen me, "Hey what are you doing?" "Oh, I'm a school counselor." And be able to present that image to not only them but then even further with conferences and being an active member and upholding the profession and moving it forward and progress and advocacy and all of that and actively working towards that as well, so, having a peer support network in your own profession and then role modeling.

Overall, arriving at this point in their professional development allowed many CITs to recognize the privilege associated with a counselor identity and being a part of that professional community, as reported by a preinternship CIT:

> To me, it means that I get the privilege of spending time with people and spending time with them in their darkest hours, sometimes their most confused states, but I get to help them along with their process of change. I feel privileged to actually get to spend that time and to have that trust from my clients.

All CITs reported that professional identity was a work in "transition" and a "growth process." This challenge was aptly described by one intern:

> I struggled with professional identity because I wasn't finding that right fit. I always had a sense of discomfort in things with my [former] professions. [Now] I have . . . a huge sense of peace and calm, and I identify that with having a professional identity that I have never had before.

The sense of fit within the profession, within a professional community, and within one's responsibility to the profession signals that CITs have moved into the self-validation and self-motivation that will sustain them during their professional lives.

Discussion

In each transformational task, CITs articulated progress from a focus on individual skills and individual experts to awareness of a systemic context of self-authorizing, self-motivating, and self-locating within a professional community. For these students, the transformational tasks captured their movement into course work, through course work into practice, then through practice as they anticipate "the real world" after graduation. For these new professionals, the path to integration of personal and professional identities was energized by their commitment to their chosen profession.

Although several studies on professional identity development have been conducted (Auxier et al., 2003; Brott & Myers, 1999; Woodside et al., 2007), it is important to note that this qualitative study was the first to interview a cross-section of CITs from the beginning of their programs to prepracticum, preinternship, and pregraduation. There are similarities and differences in some of the findings in comparison with these studies that warrant discussion.

First, this study revealed that across time and experiences a progression from a reliance on external teachings and validation to a more internalized view of counseling and self-validation exists. Auxier et al. (2003) described a similar recycling process reported by CIT interns as they reflected on their supervision experiences and professional skills. Brott and Myers (1999) noted similar findings in that new professionals focus on external authorities to learn professional skills during their graduate programs. However, our theory expands this understanding to reflect the various strands of effort, or tasks, that CITs must navigate simultaneously to incorporate learning from experts to an eventual reliance on their own judgment in practice.

Second, in the current study, the CITs' abilities to integrate personal and professional identities occurred during the last stages of their counselor education programs. This is consistent with the findings of Brott and Myers (1999) and Auxier et al. (2003), in which the third stage of professional identity development occurs when the new professional integrates experience with theory, merges personal and professional identities, and begins to self-evaluate. The preinternship and pregraduation CITs reported these behaviors as they discussed a strong sense of professional community and integrating their personal values with the ones they have developed as a professional counselor. Because they were able to self-validate as well as self-evaluate at this stage of their training, they were able to discuss their professional identities in more concrete terms than in earlier stages of their training. In this study, however, systemic thinking was a consistent theme among the pregraduation CITs, suggesting that the integration with the professional community remains important—that self-evaluation and self-validation is located within the context of the profession rather than resting solely in the individual.

Interestingly, the themes found in Howard et al.'s (2006) and Woodside et al.'s (2007) studies were all present in this study; however,

because those studies took one snapshot of the critical incidents and experiences of students at one point in their training, neither study was designed to discern the extent to which common developmental tasks are progressive. In other words, the present study provides a temporal sense of progression to their findings and may facilitate the application of Howard et al.'s and Woodside et al.'s insights into practice of counselor education and assessment of student progress. Similarly, these findings are consistent with those of Nelson and Jackson (2003), who found that lifelong learning; personal growth; the role of experience; relationships with professors, supervisors, and others; pride in accomplishments; and public misperceptions of counseling were common themes in the professional identity development of Hispanic respondents, while noting the unique challenges experienced by that diverse population. The findings of this study are consistent with prior studies, lending additional confidence in these results.

Finally, the developmental progression of how CITs transformed their identities from beginning to end of their counselor education programs should be noted. Although Auxier et al. (2003) developed a grounded theory of recycling identity formation process with CIT interns, this was not observed with all groups interviewed in this study. In the present study, this was observed in the later stages of training with preinternship and pregraduation CITs but not in the new or prepracticum CITs. This may indicate that the actual experience of counseling clients is essential to CITs' professional identity development, specifically as it relates to their integration of expert knowledge, personal values, professional values, and membership in the professional community.

Limitations and Implications

As with all research, variable interpretations are possible. Qualitative research, however, carries with it more burden in this regard, because the themes that emerged from the interviews and the resulting proposed theory may be variously perceived and interpreted. To address this limitation, we acknowledged existing biases and assumptions and remained open to new discoveries in the data but triangulated emerging results with current literature. The inclusion of diverse respondents from two regions of the country from two counseling specialties was an attempt to broaden the responses; however, respondents from these two campuses may not be representative of other populations. It is also noted that the dual roles of researcher and professor might have elicited "positive talk" from respondents, even though we designed the focus group format to encourage honest responses and the questions to not prompt reflection on the programs or instructors. However, another methodological limitation exists because of the focus group format for data collection: Individual interviews might have allowed in-depth exploration of individual experiences of professional identity development that might have been too threatening or uncomfortable to share in front of peers. Despite these limitations, the study does offer some insights into professional identity development that might be used in counselor education.

With professional identity garnering much attention in the counseling profession, counselor educators are aware of the need to foster the development of and appreciation for professional identity as a counselor. Looking at each transformational task, counselor educators can use these results to facilitate professional identity. It is important to note that, similar to the development of cognitive complexity, these tasks emerge as developmentally determined on the basis of facilitating events and conditions (Granello, 2000). In the definition of counseling transformational task, educators in early program courses might require students to write their own definitions of counseling, then ask students to juxtapose those with the definitions offered by textbook authors and experts. Helping students to articulate their own personal definitions of counseling may be informed through the field experiences of practicum and internship, but allowing students to explore their personal meanings may help with internalizing professional values.

For the responsibility for professional growth transformational task, CITs might benefit from more self-direction in educational choices beginning in early program courses. Whereas the use of learning contracts varies from instructor to instructor, the intentional shifting of responsibility for learning to the CIT may help foster self-directed learning and balance the new CIT's need for external validation. This intentional challenge for all CITs to internalize responsibility for learning may facilitate the self-validation and self-evaluation process. Once in practicum, students in this study began to integrate their newfound research skills by seeking resources on their own. To help CITs internalize responsibility for learning, counselor educators and supervisors can provide a list of resources and encourage them to use their professional journals to find resources to use in their counseling practices.

For the transformation to systemic identity transformational task, providing CITs with early experiences to practice skills with live clients may resolve self-doubt and performance anxiety that perpetuates individual self-focus. Once the self-focus and questions of individual counseling efficacy are being resolved through practice, CITs may be able to expand their field of awareness to practice more systemic thinking. With practice, systems thinking concerning clients, counseling settings, and the profession may facilitate the integration of system-level identity with professional community values. Counselor educators can foster professional identity by making explicit the professional community CITs are entering. Intentional community building with field counselors, fostering supervision collaboratives, encouraging panel presentations at professional conferences, and performing collaborative campus or field outcomes research can engender a sense of commitment to and responsibility to that professional community.

Although the public's perception of counseling was not a highlight of the results, it is important to know that the counseling profession continues to have to reframe the negative perception held by the public and future clients. New counselors come into training with these linger-

ing perceptions and rely on counselor educators to facilitate definitions that are more congruent with their personal goals for helping. In this study, new CITs seemed to require this expert knowledge and some form of external validation of their thoughts regarding their professional identities. Counselor educators and supervisors can provide this through early exposure to additional professional development opportunities, such as involvement in Chi Sigma Iota, professional conferences, and encouragement of membership in counseling professional organizations.

In essence, the results of this study imply that professional identity development in CITs does not occur only at the end of training, but starts when students enter the program.

Conclusion

Further research with counselor professional identity can provide more insight for counselor educators, counselors, and supervisors. Such research can include replication studies and similar studies in which the focus is on professional identity development within counseling specialties and within distinct geographic areas. Furthermore, professional issues such as recent licensure in certain states might add interesting variables in the development of professional identity. In addition, studies that examine professional identity development for practicing professionals may also provide a longer vision of professional identity development. Future research may extend the insights of this study by examining the development of practicing counselors' and supervisors' professional identities, which will provide a more complete overall definition of professional identity and what it means at different stages during counselors' careers. This information can provide programming information to counselor educators to ensure CITs have solid professional identities as they enter the workforce. Furthermore, as counselors strive to share a common professional identity, future research can help define and describe the ongoing progression of counselors' professional identities and how counselors can be supported in the different stages of their careers.

From this study, the insights into professional identity development can be conceptualized as transformational tasks that are undertaken simultaneously for CITs. These transformational tasks can be used to improve counselor education programs so that new counselors are not only technically proficient but also committed to the community of professionals in which they will be immersed.

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APPENDIX
Focus Group Questions

1. How has counseling been defined by experts? By the public?
2. Define counseling in your own words. What does it mean for *you* to be a counselor?
3. How has this definition of counseling changed for you? When did that happen?
4. Define professional identity in your own words.
5. What, in your past, has your professional identity been? Have you had a professional identity before?
6. Describe your professional identity at the current moment. Where are you in the process of becoming a professional counselor?
   a. Follow-up questions:
      i. How do you feel about yourself as a counselor?
      ii. What feelings do you have about becoming a counselor?
7. What do you think you need to progress to the next level of development of your professional identity?
8. What in your training so far has contributed *most* to your professional identity as a counselor and why?
9. What experiences have resonated *most* with what you believe you will be doing as a professional counselor and why?
10. As you look into the future at joining the counseling profession, what more do you need to learn? What will you do to learn those things?
11. How will you know you are a "professional counselor"? What will happen that will let you know "*Now* I am a professional"?