

Discussion Thread: Professional Identity

In Chapter 1, one of the activities asked you to imagine entering an occupation that had no accepted standards for preparation (accreditation), no state or national credentials (licensure), no ethical standards for practice (ACA / Division Codes of Ethics), no foundation for serving a pluralistic and culturally rich and diverse population, and as a consequence, no defined areas of competence or scope of practice. In reality, these areas describe the identity of a profession. Yet at the same time, these areas are shaped by this identity. If you look at the history of the counseling profession, perhaps the reason that counseling does not have the same stature in the mental health field as some of the other helping professions (e.g., Licensed Clinical Social Worker) is because what we were asked to imagine in the activity was, in some measure, the state of our profession in the not-so-ancient past. We lacked a cohesive counselor identity which impeded the development of these areas, which then impedes the changes needed to further develop a cohesive counselor identity. See the cycle?

One arena where we recently experienced this ongoing battle was during the CACREP-only discussions as a future requirement for licensure by some states. If you look at the arguments, it appears that much of this centers on fact that we still struggle with developing a cohesive “counselor identity” in regards to these very areas. Because there has been a vaguely defined counselor identity, the licensed professionals and educators hold a wide range of academic experiences and professional identities. Thus, attempts to bring the same uniformity seen in LCSW etc. brings a firestorm of controversy as these identities have different perspectives and can feel threatened. This then hinders the development of a cohesive counselor identity in training requirements (i.e., accreditation) that we need to advance the field of counseling. Thus, in spite of the fact that our training is more extensive, we continue to lack parity in various professional settings with LCSW and others who do have common accreditation. As leaders in the field, you are the ones who are going to address how to break this cycle and move the profession of counseling forward in a cohesive manner.

In this discussion, you are going to discuss the impact of having or not having a cohesive counselor identity in the areas of accepted standards for preparation (accreditation), no state or national credentials (inconsistent licensure requirements), and ethical standards for practice as defined by a counseling-specific (ACA) professional affiliations. As you discuss this, think about the issues created by not having clearly defined counselor identity, and how we as leaders can break the cycle?

Please reflect on the following:

- What is our counselor identity?
- Does counselor identity even matter? If so, why? If not, why?
- How is counselor identity reflected in our training (accreditation) and licensure requirements, and/or code of ethics?

- Do we really need a principle professional organization (ACA)?
- Do we really need standardization of requirements in these arenas?

COUC860—Discussion Board #1—Due: January 26, 2025

A counselor identity is what demonstrates to the world who or what counselors are individually as well as collectively as a profession. It is indeed a very important need for there to be a clear understanding of what it means to be a counselor. Without a clear delineation of what this means, how would clients know what service they are seeking when calling a counselor. I am reminded of the Biblical idea where there was no clear understanding of what was right or wrong because the law had been lost or forgotten by most including the leaders. Judges 21:25 NET says, “In those days Israel had no king. Each man did what he considered to be right” (other translations add “in his own eyes”). This indicates to me that we need guidelines, but it does not mean that the various practitioners must be cookie cutter. Each practitioner can have different specialties or have various modalities that separates them from others who are operating under the same guidance umbrella of ethics and laws.

The identity of counselors as a group are present in the arena of academic preparation and in the ethics code through ideals such as “do no harm”. As a group counselors are mandated to seek training and to lean on scholarship and research to ensure that valid modalities are being utilized to assist clients effectively. Organization like the ACA help to bring professional counselors together under a single Code of Ethics where it is not each person for themselves deciding what they deem to be acceptable. Having a group identity of sorts also allows for there to be varying ideas put forward that can be adopted in or put aside as needed through debate and research efforts. Without the standardized guidance, there really is no way to know what extremes counseling practitioners may go to. By being organized the group can be better equipped to learn from the successes and failures of past and present ideas. The textbook indicates that in the past the profession has been guilty of “developing not as “one voice” but with strands” which is exactly why have organization is critical as the field of counseling continues to grow and develop (Chang et al., 2022).

Chang, C. Y. & Barrio Minton, C. A. (2022). *Professional Counseling Excellence through Leadership and Advocacy* (Kindle) (2nd. ed.). Routledge. ISBN: 9780367494568.

Jeremy Gillentine
334-657-6366

Response #1

Hillary Marker—January 16, 2025, 2:33 PM

Our counselor identity includes our ability to independently assess, diagnose, and treatment plan for individuals, couples, and groups that coincide with our professional expertise and training. A clear and distinct counselor identity is of utmost importance because it determines our ability to successfully complete the tasks related to our professional roles. Our accreditation, licensure requirements, and ethics must also accurately reflect our counselor identity. As a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) in Michigan, this became readily apparent to me a few years back when we nearly lost our ability to continue counseling because of the lack of clarity in what an LPC can do and how this is different from the training of other related mental health professionals, notably licensed clinical social workers and licensed psychologists. Another motivating force behind the need for a unified and standardized counselor identity via accreditation and licensure standards is the lack of traction for the Counseling Compact in several states. Compared to other states, Michigan is behind the times with no current requirement for continued education credits, contributing to the disparity within what constitutes counselor identity.

Hillary

Thanks for the post and sharing the variety of details regarding the importance for standards and a clear definition of who or what counselor professionals are without ambiguity of the roles they are fulfilling. I do see value in states having autonomy due to the vast differences that exist in the various locations across our nation and the world. Local regulations should reflect the desires and cultural norms of the people in each state. However, as a broader idea, the states should be able to agree on the basic tenets of who and what counselors are so there can be a general continuity across the nation. It does seem that it would be helpful to make the delineation between what a psychologist, psychiatrist, Clinical Social Worker, and Counselors do and why the general public would need one resource over the other. Organizations such as CACREP appear to be helping make things more consistent across the US. As long as this group and others do not become tyrants but keep with the theme of unification, they will continue to help the issues mentioned throughout chapter one in our textbook.

Thanks

Jeremy Gillentine 334-657-6366

Response #2

Erica Gray—January 17, 2025, 10:46 PM

I would say that our counselor identity is a helping profession that learns strategies, techniques, and attitudes that work to promote the wellness of our clients so that they can live as their best selves. Part of promoting wellness includes working through struggles, problems, and symptoms of mental health disorders. Whatever the issues a person is facing, we do our best to help them using various theoretical approaches and strategies while hopefully maintaining an attitude of compassion and unconditional positive regard. I believe counselor identity matters and needs to be separated from psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers particularly because there is

overlap with these fields. Still, they each have their own areas of specialty and scopes of practice. I think that not having a unified standard of practice for counselors can hurt the field greatly. People might go to someone who is calling themselves a counselor who does not have the same training or meet the same standards that licensed professional counselors meet and think that counselors have no idea what they are doing or provide no benefit. I also think it is important to have an ethical code for counselors that helps provide legitimacy and encourages best practices among clinicians.

Erica

Thanks for your post. As you mentioned, there is certainly a need for there to be clearly delineated distinctions between the various fields. It seems evident to me that these differences need to be made more distinctive to the general public. There are many factors that go into determining an identity that must be considered that should reflect the practitioners and the service[s] being provided. We must have standards to protect people who seek out a counselor so they can be confident the person who calls themselves a counselor will indeed be competent to do the work they are being hired to perform in an evidence-based manner. As with anything, there is a fine line between ethical standards and laws that promote unity and a group that is attempting to push an agenda through the guise of protecting the public. It is a wise and ethical requirement that we as counselors should not be seeking an opportunity to push our values on clients who do not align with them as indicated in the ACA code of ethics. However, those writing the rules and guidelines need to be sure they are not pushing their own values or beliefs through legislation. Just as the state of Tennessee pushed back against the transgender and homosexual controversial law requiring counselors to see those who are seeking counseling for practices that violate the counselor's conscience, there must be a balance in seeking to treat all people fairly, ethically, and with kindness and forcing others to put their deeply held beliefs aside for the sake of those choosing to live in a manner that is in opposition to the counselor's sacredly held beliefs. When a person is told they must assist a person who is living in sin (according to the counselor's worldview), it would seem a boundary has been crossed. A counselor should never be asked or forced to help a client to feel comfortable living such a life. From the Christian Worldview perspective, this is in direct opposition to the ethical directive to do no harm. Identity is necessary but one that should be reflective of the group as a whole and not a minority of those in leadership roles.