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The Development of Professional Identity and the Impact of Counselor Educators: Examining the Role of Observational Learning and Self-Efficacy

Kellyanne Brady
kbrady1@molloy.edu

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## Examining the Role of Observational Learning and Self-Efficacy
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Introduction

Professional identity is defined as the internalization of a frame of reference provided by a profession which aids in a person's ability to understand their role as a member of a larger group with a unique purpose (Pistole & Roberts, 2002). Professional identity includes values, knowledge and skills, a sense of community, pride in the affiliation with the profession, and a sense of responsibility of the profession (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010; Moss, Gibson, & Dollarhide, 2014). Lack of distinction among related mental health professions provides a sense of confusion. Counseling is a distinct profession with it's own identity, and confusion results in lack of public clarity surrounding the profession, an ineffective collective identity, which results in a lack of direction, unclear standards of practice, and the absence of a mission and professional values, and disparity among the professions which results in differences in hiring practices, wages, and reimbursement from health insurance companies (Mellin, Hunt, & Nichols, 2011; Pistole & Roberts, 2002; Smith, 2001). Professional identity development begins in counselor education programs.

Research supports the role of counselor educators in the professional identity development of students. Educators can promote professional identity development in students by assigning students the task of interviewing and shadowing professionals, ensuring clinical placements reflect real-word experiences for counselors, utilizing guest speakers, including examples from practice, promoting the development of realistic expectations and promoting self-directed activities (Gibson et al., 2010; Moss et al., 2014). Research by Woo, Storlie, & Baltrinic (2016) and Calley & Hawley (2008) support the idea that counselor educators engage student in profession identity related discussions and activities.

This study sought to examine the relationship between professional identity development the role of counselor educators as models of professional identity through the promotion of self-efficacy. As self-efficacy was considered to be a factor in the development and execution of professional identity, Social Learning Theory was used as a theoretical framework for the study.

Counselor Educator Professional Identity **Behaviors** and **Encouragement** of Professional Identity → Self-Efficacy ↔ Professional Identity
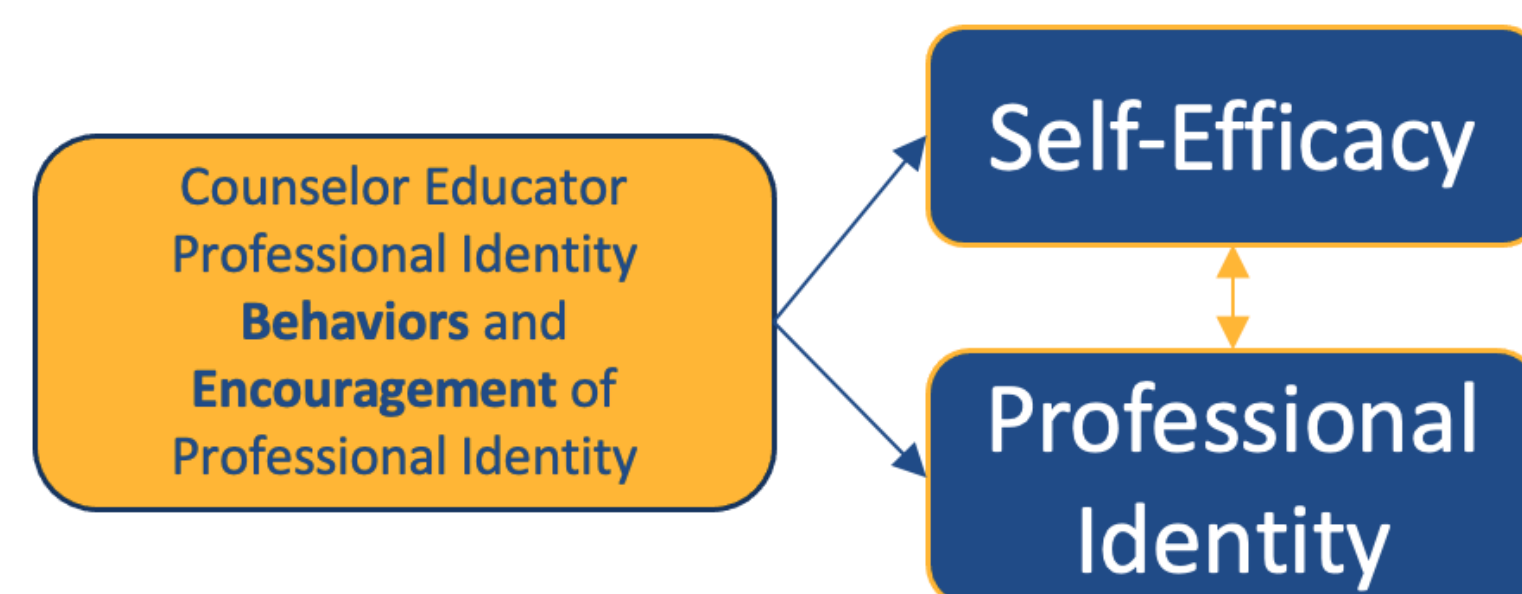
This research aims to further inform counselor educators on the mechanisms to promote professional identity.

Author Information

This study was conducted as part of a dissertation requirement to fulfill the requirements for a doctoral degree in Mental Health Counseling at Pace University. Email kbrady1@molloy.edu with questions. Poster presented at the 2023 ACES Conference.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Participants' perceptions of their counselor educators' professional identities will be positively correlated with their own self-perceived professional identity.
Hypothesis 2: Participants with higher scores on a measure of professional identity will have higher self-efficacy.
Hypothesis 3: Participants with strong perceptions of their educators' professional identity will have higher self-efficacy scores.
Hypothesis 4: The relationship between self-reported professional identity and self-efficacy related to professional identity activities will be moderated by the participants' perceptions of the counselor educators' professional identity.
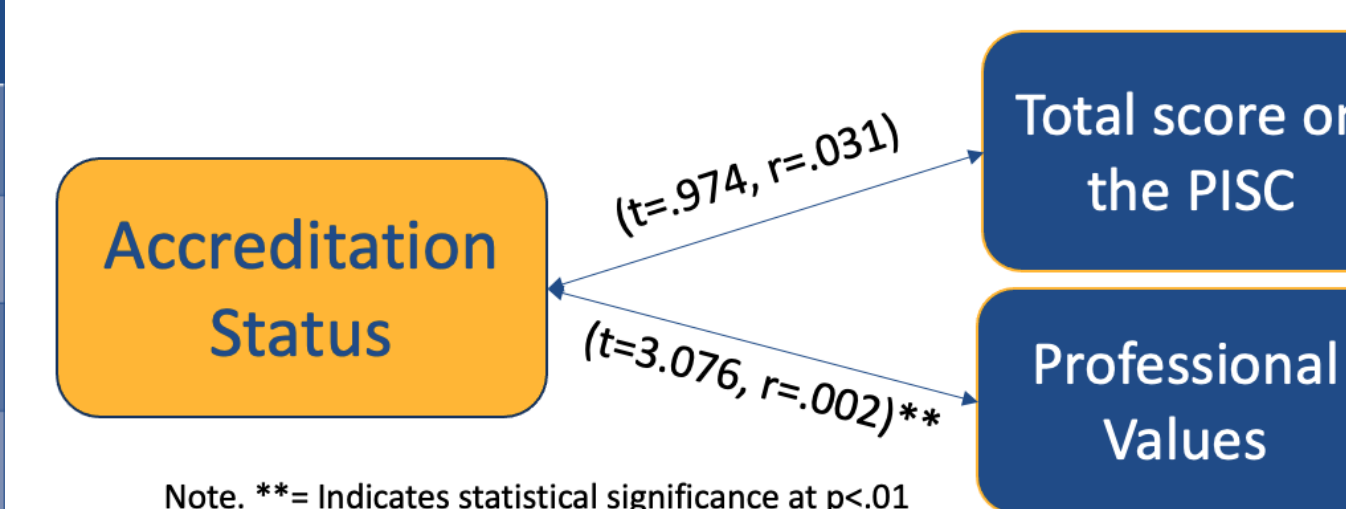**Hypothesis 5:** Program accreditation status will be positively correlated with participants' professional identity.

Results

The Relationship Between Professional Identity and Counselor Educator Professional Identity and Self-Efficacy	Counselor Educator Professional Identity Behaviors		Counselor Educator Encouragement of Student Professional Identity		Self-Efficacy Related to Professional Identity Behaviors	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
Engagement Behavior	.237**	3.607	.273**	4.194	-.025	-.386
Knowledge of the Profession	.364**	5.773	.088**	4.028	.137****	2.048
Attitude Towards the Profession	.339**	5.321	.354**	5.583	.508**	6.078
Professional Roles and Expertise	.316**	4.022	.324**	5.062	.002	.023
Philosophy of the Profession	.261**	3.987	.294**	4.543	-.059	-.874
Professional Values	.335**	5.258	.213***	3.222	.069	1.160
Total Score	.431**	7.045	.408**	6.597	.444**	7.326

Note. **Indicates statistical significance at p<.001; *** Indicates statistical significance at p<.01; **** indicates statistical significance at p<.05

The Relationship Between Professional Identity and Counselor Educator Professional Identity and Self-Efficacy	Counselor Educator Professional Identity Behaviors		Counselor Educator Encouragement of Student Professional Identity		Self-Efficacy Related to Professional Identity Behaviors	
	R^2 with Variables Removed	ΔR^2	R^2 with Variables Removed	ΔR^2	R^2 with Variables Removed	ΔR^2
Engagement Behavior	.231	-.002	.171	-.015	.322	.000
Knowledge of the Profession	.204	-.029	.183	-.002	.309	-.013
Attitude Towards the Profession	.227	-.006	.175	-.011	.205	-.117
Professional Roles and Expertise	.231	-.002	.184	-.002	.323	.000
Philosophy of the Profession	.230	-.002	.174	-.012	.320	-.002
Professional Values	.188	-.044	.178	-.007	.318	-.004

Accreditation Status —(t=.974, r=.031)→ Total score on the PISC

Accreditation Status —(t=3.076, r=.002)**→ Professional Values

Note. **= Indicates statistical significance at p<.01

Linear Regression Analysis Examining the Effect of Counselor Educator Professional Identity on Participant Self-Efficacy					
R^2=.094	r	β	t	b	95% CI
Counselor Educator's Professional Identity Behaviors	.269**	.124	1.355	.102	[-.046, .250]
Counselor Educator's Encouragement of the Student's Professional Identity	.293**	.205***	2.243	.150	[.018, .282]

Note. ** Indicates statistical significance at p<.001, *** Indicates statistical significance at p<.05

No moderating effects were found in the relationship between professional identity and self-efficacy; therefore, perceptions of counselor educators was not found to have an interaction effect on the relationship between participant professional identity and self-efficacy related to professional identity behaviors.

Methods

Participants were currently enrolled in a Master's-level counselor education program or recently graduated from a counselor education program. Students still enrolled were required to either be enrolled in or have already completed their practical experience component of their education program. Participants were recruited from CACREP and non-CACREP accredited programs. The final participant pool was 220.

Measures utilized were the Professional Identity Scale in Counseling (PISC; Woo & Henfield, 2015) to measure professional identity, the New General Self-Efficacy Scale (NGSE; Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001) to measure a level of self efficacy related to professional identity behaviors, The Counselor Educator's Professional Identity Behaviors subscale and the Counselor Educator's Encouragement of Student's Professional Identity subscale developed in the research by Cruikshanks and Burns (2017), and a measure of demographics, including relevant information pertaining to their counseling program.

Discussion

The findings of this study support the idea that professional identity is influenced by counselor educators and self-efficacy. The findings provided additional support for the importance of counselor educators' active engagement in fostering students' professional identity development (Brat et al., 2016; Chang, 2012). Active engagement in the process of students' professional identity development involves engaging in discussion of professional growth and specific discussions pertaining to identity development to promote clarity and understanding. The finding that encouragement of professional identity behaviors played a statistically significant role in the development of self-efficacy emphasizes the effect of counselor educators' direct encouragement of professional identity development on self-efficacy, as opposed to the effect of vicarious learning on students. As mentioned, utilizing direct encouragement of professional identity can promote students' ability to engage in behaviors aligned with a strong professional identity early in their career and feel empowered to continue with these activities as they embark on their careers after graduation (Burkholder, 2012; Gibson et al., 2010). This study adds to the current evidence base that promotes active engagement on the part of counselor educators and supports the promotion of intentionality in counselor education with tasks and activities that immerse students in professional identity experiences that promote identity development and integration.

References

See associated handout for poster references.