

Counsellors Negotiating Professional Identity in the Midst of Exogenous Change: A Case Study

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Abstract

This research study sought to understand how Canadian counsellors in the province of Ontario negotiated and constructed their professional identity amid unfolding regulatory changes. These changes would bring restrictions to both title use and practice of psychotherapy once the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario was established and legislation was fully enacted. For those who identify with the title of ‘counsellor’ and share overlapping scopes of practice with psychotherapy it is uncertain what they will draw upon to construct, rework or maintain their counsellor professional identity. The intention was to build a descriptive, experiential account of the identity work being done by counsellors as they navigated through the uncertainty accompanying this period of transition.

A qualitative single case study design was used to explore the particularity of this contemporary occurrence of professional identity construction employing multiple data collection sources to garner a holistic picture of this phenomenon. Input was gathered from twenty-four Ontario counsellors who were students, novice or experienced practitioners who either participated in two semi-structured interviews (n=10) or an asynchronous virtual focus group hosted in the discussion forum of Blackboard Learn™ (n= 14). Additional data sources included the use of a demographic questionnaire, participant observation, and document analysis. In order to augment more subtle or deeper meaning levels additional data collection instruments were employed and these included the use of participant diagramming, a request for a descriptive metaphor, and graphic elicitation diagram. Using a thematic analysis strategy, a within case and cross analysis of the embedded subunits was undertaken.

Findings from the data analysis revealed a number of salient themes that offered insights into how counsellors construct their professional identity during periods of uncertainty. There were five higher order or global themes which emerged: (a) counsellors have *a sense of agency* around the construction and communication of their professional identity, (b) identity construction is a process of *organic, emergent growth* that continues throughout professional life; (c) the shaping and negotiation of counsellor professional identity is *guided by values*; (d) when change contexts arise counsellors *safeguard identity integrity* by protecting its distinctiveness, definitional parameters and characterization in practice settings; and (e) during transition periods counsellors are willing to execute *adaptive shifting* as part of their identity

work provided this does not infringe upon their professional values. Results indicate that meaning, values and agency galvanize the professional identity work done by counsellors and during transition brought about by a significant exogenous change event, such as the recent moves toward professional regulation, these negotiation strategies prevail.

This case study took advantage of a contemporary instance of counsellor professional identity construction during unprecedented change to provide not only a rich description of this phenomenon but also to introduce a thematic diagram to act as a starting point for further discussion. Implications for counsellors, counsellor education and training programs, the profession, and future research are each discussed along with ideas for fostering informal avenues for counsellors across the experience spectrum to nurture their professional identity in a protean, agential manner.

Keywords: professional identity, counsellor identity construction, case study research, regulation of psychotherapy, Canadian counsellor identity

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Dedication

I dedicate this work and give special thanks to my mother Mary who knew the journey's purpose and kept my feet close to that path during times of doubt and dwindling fortitude.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem Statement

Nigel is preparing some materials he has gathered for his internship student on the ethics code for counsellors which they can go through together during her weekly supervision session. A bit nervous, June suddenly remembers the encouraging words of her mentor about being ‘meant for this work’ and confidently goes to the waiting room to welcome her very first counselling client. In a profound moment of shared silence Delia and her young client grappling with one of life’s givens notice the quiet arrival of a deer in the woods just outside of the large panoramic windows of the counselling room. Each counsellor during these moments has in some way been undertaking the iterative, incremental work of navigating, shaping and negotiating their professional identity. The challenge for these Canadian counsellors residing in Ontario, and shared with their counselling colleagues worldwide, is that counsellor professional identity is often viewed as being rather elusive and unsettled. This has been attributed at times to an inability by the profession to articulate who counsellors are, what they stand for, why they matter and how they are distinct. Counsellors belong to a profession that has and continues to struggle with a “marginal professional status” (McLaughlin & Boettcher, 2009, p. 140), an inability to gain economic parity from third party funders or employers who “expect to pay less for a counsellor” (i.e., gender predominance in counsellors (women) linked with other low-paid forms of helping occupations) (Webb, 2000, p. 305), and a lack of recognition due to confusion and fallacious portrayals that downplay proficiency of counsellors (MacLeod, 1997). Concerns about perpetually having to defend the relevance of their unique expertise in relation to psychology and social work (Manthei, 1995) or against forces set to undermine their core humanistic values (Hansen, 2003), have left counsellors feeling othered and caused some to become “ashamed and apologetic” about their profession (West-Olatunji, 2013, p. 1). The profession has also been challenged by infighting as contrary agendas of specialties “splinter” attempts at a cohesive identity (Shallcross, 2013) while others become distracted by the rhetoric of professionalization that “tantalises with promises of certainty and singularity” for this profession seeking recognition (Crocket, Flanagan, Winslade, & Kotze, 2011, p. 139; see also Miller, 1994). Each of these has subtly undermined the integrity and self-determination of individual counsellors and their profession (Tudor, 2013).

All of these dilemmas in some way undermine counsellor identity work by unsettling and making it hard for counsellors to pin down what constitutes this unique professional identity currently and moving into the future. Perhaps the most bewildering challenge counsellors' face as they go about their professional identity construction is the introduction and roll out of regulatory frameworks that can test, redefine and at times erode the solidarity of the profession while discharging additional tensions on individual counsellors. Decisions to move from voluntary to statutory regulation of counselling and psychotherapy in a number of jurisdictions (global, national and local) have been fully enacted and supported in some instances (American Counseling Association, 2009; Shallcross, 2009) while elsewhere fervent campaigns challenging the "alleged beneficence" have halted proposed changes (House, 2012, p. 163; see also Mowbray, 1995; Parker & Revelli, 2008; Postle, 2007; Postle & House, 2009; Tudor, 2011). Indecision over the benefits and drawbacks of statutory regulation have seen the repeal of earlier decisions (Bailey, 2004; Independently Registered Psychotherapy Practitioners, 2011), calls for a more cautious, staged process (Macleod & McSherry, 2007), and in some cases like Ontario, a desire for more extensive consultation before implementing full proclamation of regulatory legislation (Government of Ontario, 2007).

While a cohesive identity continues to elude the counselling profession internationally and in Canada, counsellors in Ontario are facing an unprecedented move toward a regulatory college that will oversee title and practice restrictions to psychotherapy, which is set to have unknown consequences for the construction of their counsellor professional identity. In light of regulatory outcomes that counsellors have experienced in other jurisdictions, it is unclear how this group of counsellors will continue to negotiate their professional identity amid changes to the remit of their profession. This study will investigate using a case study approach exactly what this group of counsellors draw upon to construct, rework or maintain their professional identity during such an exogenous change event. A brief overview of the regulatory framework and context of the mental health care delivery in Canada's provincial jurisdictions will provide some much needed clarification on what is considered a complex, multifaceted system (Cummings, 1990; Gazzola & Smith, 2007).

Context and Scope of the Study

Regulation of Mental Healthcare in Canada

Licensing and the regulation of mental health professionals is the purview of provincial or territorial jurisdictions in Canada. Counselling and psychotherapy are practices within the mental healthcare field that have seen a slow progression toward statutory regulation across the ten provinces and three territories. Three provinces (Québec, Nova Scotia, and Ontario) have established a level of statutory regulation, three are either quite close or persistently seeking proclamation of legislation (British Columbia, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick), and four other provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Newfoundland) along with the three territories (Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Yukon) are not working to achieve regulation of counselling or psychotherapy at this time (Martin, Turcotte, Matte, & Shepard, 2013). Each of these falls within a certain model of regulation, such as “self-regulation, negative licensing, co-regulation, reservation of title, reservation of title and certain core practices, reservation of title and whole scale practice restriction” (Tudor, 2013, p. 49), that exists along a regulatory continuum between self (least restrictive) and state control (most restrictive) (Macleod & McSherry, 2007). When multiple models of regulation (any combination of the six outlined) exist, as in Canada, there are also wide variations in registration criteria, clinical scope, title use, program accreditation, professional competencies, and related practice activities like training, research, or supervision policy which only increases misinterpretations, contradictions, and uncertainty for the individual professional, their prospective clients, and the overall profession (Tudor, 2013). In order to highlight some of this variability and provide context for what is transpiring for counsellors in Ontario, the context of this case study, a brief synopsis of the current regulatory climate in neighbouring provinces is in order.

The province with the most extensive and well established statutory regulation of the counselling profession is Québec. L’Ordre des conseillers et conseillères d’orientation du Québec (OCCOQ) established some 50 years ago oversees the regulation of several reserved titles that only its members are authorized to use: conseiller d’orientation, conseillère d’orientation, orienteur professionnel, orienteur, guidance counsellor, and vocational guidance counsellor (Government of Québec, 2013). It was not until the adoption of Bill 21 by the National Assembly of Québec (2009) that legislation authorizing the reservation of specific

activities within their scope of practice came into being. These changes were a move away from previous, less restrictive models of regulation (i.e., reservation of title) for the mental health professions that came in response to recommendations for greater public protection (Bernier Report, 2002; Trudeau Report, 2005). In lieu of these changes guidance counsellors, often viewed as corresponding with counsellors and members of the counselling profession in other provinces in Canada (Martin et al., 2013), must now apply to the College of Psychologists of Québec (Ordre des Psychologues du Québec, 2013) and meet additional credentialing requirements (e.g., knowledge of theoretical intervention models, graduate degree, meet supervision hours, education on ethics and regulation) to have access to the title and reserved act of psychotherapy as the legal privilege has only been given to psychologists (members of l'Ordre des psychologues du Québec, OPQ) and physicians (members of the College des Médecins du Québec). Other professionals who are members of the OCCOQ, Ordre des ergothérapeutes du Québec, Ordre des infirmières et des infirmiers du Québec, Ordre des psychoéducateurs et des psychoéducatrices du Québec, Ordre des travailleurs sociaux et des thérapeutes conjugaux et familiaux du Québec are required to apply for a permit to practice psychotherapy (OPQ, 2013). Psychotherapy is defined as a psychological treatment for mental or behavioural disorders causing significant impairment in thinking, actions, or emotions that “goes beyond help aimed at dealing with everyday difficulties and beyond a support or counselling role” (National Assembly of Québec, 2009, ch. 28, 187.1). To summarize, in Québec there is statutory regulation of counselling (i.e., conseiller d'orientation, conseillère d'orientation, orienteur professionnel, orienteur, guidance counsellor, and vocational guidance counsellor) and psychotherapy.

The province of Nova Scotia has a less restrictive model of regulation which secures title protection for ‘Registered Counselling Therapist’, ‘Counselling Therapist’, and ‘Registered Counselling Therapist Candidate’. After a lengthy process of pursuing regulation for the counselling profession that began in 1995, it was only in 2008 that the provincial government through Bill 201 granted title protection only, and later in 2011 the Nova Scotia College of Counselling Therapists (NSCCT) was put in place to oversee this process (Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association, 2012). Three other provinces have also invested considerable time and effort in their pursuit of regulation for counselling most notably British Columbia, which has seen the British Columbia Association of Clinical Counsellors (BCACC) work tirelessly for almost 20 years. Currently under a voluntary registration system, which is one of

the least restrictive models, the objective of a Task Group formed by seven counselling associations is to secure the designation of ‘counselling therapist’ and establish a regulatory College of Counselling Therapists (Bryce, 2012). Longevity in pursuing regulation of counselling has also been the case in both New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island where after almost 10 years of establishing preliminary frameworks, extensive consultation and working with the prevailing provincial government some work remains around the passing of important pieces of legislation (CCPA, 2013).

Regulatory Framework in Ontario

Counselling and psychotherapy had been unregulated practices in Ontario before revisions to the existing Regulated Health Professions Act (RHPA) that ushered in the Ontario Psychotherapy Act (Government of Ontario, 2007) and cleared the way to found the College of Registered Psychotherapists and Registered Mental Health Therapists of Ontario (CRPRMHTO). The Psychotherapy Act not only imposes reservation of the titles, Registered Psychotherapist and Registered Mental Health Therapist, it also restricts certain practices and activities associated with these two designations (Government of Ontario, 2007). A Transitional Council was also appointed and a registrar to oversee the implementation of the regulatory college and tasked with the structuring of the requirements for registration, quality assurance and professional misconduct frameworks (Martin et al., 2013). Using this particular regulatory model (reservation of title and restriction of activities) places Ontario at the more restrictive end of the continuum (Tudor, 2013) like Québec, which is the only other province to regulate psychotherapy in Canada. Unlike Québec where psychotherapy is regulated by permit, in Ontario a college of psychotherapy (i.e., College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario) has also been created which is unprecedented as no other college of psychotherapy exists in Canada. Discussion and debate continue over registration, training, credentials, and other issues making this an evolving process (Martin et al., 2013) most notably in April 2013 at the request of the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC) the “Registered Mental Health Therapist” was removed from the name of the college (now known as the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario, CRPO). On April 1, 2015 the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC) through proclamation of the Psychotherapy Act (Government of Ontario, 2007) created the CRPO, but proclamation of the controlled act of psychotherapy was postponed

to “allow time to develop a better understanding of its meaning and implications” (CRPO, 2015). As of April 2015, the title of ‘psychotherapist’ is reserved for members belonging to the regulated professions designated by the MOHLTC and those who apply to become registered members of the newly appointed College.

For counsellors not interested in becoming members or perhaps not able to meet the requirements to become registered with the CPRO, there is no legislation preventing them from using the title ‘counsellor’ or undertaking the act of ‘counselling’ provided none of the activities they would be doing in their work involved those reserved according to the Act for ‘registered psychotherapists’ (Alves & Gazzola, 2013). This has serious implications for counsellors because the scope of practice now reserved for psychotherapists encompasses the sphere of activities that had previously defined counselling in Ontario. Even though counselling was not the target of regulation, if a counsellor does not join the CRPO then they cannot legally practice counselling in the manner it was undertaken prior to April 1, 2015.

This has further implications for counsellors and their professional associations, internship sites, workplace settings, or educational training programs who have been accustomed prior to the introduction of the regulatory legislation to use the terms counselling and psychotherapy “interchangeably” when referring to practice behaviour and to identify themselves to others (e.g., clients, colleagues, allied professions, general public) which may now fall within an enforceable group of core practices (Macleod & McSherry, 2007). Difficulties arise when trying to set restrictive parameters through statutory health practice acts assuming “the enterprise of healing can be carved into neatly severable and licensable blocks” (Cohen, 1998 as cited in Hilliard & Johnson, 2004, p. 252) because the legitimate scope of one group is often contravened at the expense of another who now acquires “practice monopoly” (Macleod & McSherry, 2007, p. 50). In Ontario the Health Professions Regulatory Advisory Council (2006) supported this more restrictive regulatory model (reservation of title and practice) to prevent unqualified individuals from practicing psychotherapy (as defined in the act) under another title (Macleod & McSherry, 2007). To summarize, the practice of psychotherapy when it is fully proclaimed will be regulated through title and a restriction of activities in Ontario while the practice of counselling and the title ‘counsellor’ remains unregulated.

Significance of the Study

Canadian counsellors work within a mental health service environment that is not straightforward as other well-established professions often have intersecting areas of proficiency and spheres of activity. To reduce ambiguous boundaries and decrease confusion for consumers it is important for counsellors to know the roles and functions of the counselling profession and be able to convey their professional identity confidently. Establishing a firm identity remains vital for sustaining ethically responsible practice, maintaining a sense of professional pride, fostering professional advocacy, and upholding the philosophical principles that set counselling apart like the wellness perspective, a focus on prevention, client empowerment, and a developmental orientation (Gale & Austin, 2003; Hanna & Bemak, 1997; Remley & Herlihy, 2007; Romano & Hage, 2000; Van Hesteren & Ivey, 1990). Not having a definitive sense of professional identity has been known to affect commitment and professional growth, create confusion around roles and responsibilities, and interfere with the delivery and quality of customer service making this a crucial issue for prospective clients and the success of counsellors (Brott & Myers, 1999; Gazzola & Smith, 2007; Remley & Herlihy, 2007; Schoen, 1989). As one of the newer mental health professions, counsellors continue to dialogue about their vision and aspirations but the acquisition of legitimacy, consumer endorsement, and professional acknowledgement has at times been slowed down by their unsettled and elusive identity (Gale & Austin, 2003; Gazzola, Smith, Kearney, & King-Andrews, 2010; Rollins, 2007).

The practice of counselling and psychotherapy will be redrawn as the regulation initiatives unfold, and it is unclear how counsellors in the province of Ontario will continue to negotiate their professional identity within the context of this exogenous change event. A sense of stability and belonging appears precarious when there are ongoing changes to a profession's identity, however, certain change contexts can afford opportunities for growth in equal proportion to a problematic scenario (Hotho, 2008). For instance when context changes occur and boundaries providing legitimacy shift not only do professions re-stratify by creating intra-professional hierarchies (Friedson, 1984) but members sometimes become "entrepreneurs of their own professional project" (MacDonald, 1999, p. 187). According to structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) there can be a "reciprocal interaction" (Yuthas, Dillard, & Rogers, 2004, p. 231) where professionals become not only recipients of change but also agents with capacity for

choice and decisive action often leading them to transform, expand, or even solidify norms of practice (Whittington, 1994). There is a possibility counsellors may consider engaging in some form of entrepreneurial activity and perhaps redesign themselves as a new hybrid profession in order to rework their identity (Hotho, 2008). Another option may be a more settled identity evolves as counsellors strengthen their alignment with the core characteristics of their profession. Other scenarios are equally possible within the context of this change event.

Whether generative or disruptive to the negotiation of professional identity, this change context affords a unique opportunity to examine in greater depth how counsellors go about the work of constructing their identity. A better understanding of this process may be helpful for counsellor training and education as professional development and program modifications are discussed to ensure counsellors remain valued and acknowledged in the changing regulatory environment. With Masters-level counsellors playing an increasingly significant role in the provision of treatment for a broad spectrum of mental health problems, the need for understanding how counsellor identity is negotiated and stabilized is important for any prolonged contribution (Gazzola & Smith, 2007; Norcross, Hedges, & Prochaska, 2002). Considering mental illness derails the lives of 1 in 4 people worldwide (WHO, 2001), the efficient delivery of services by the most appropriate professional should not be hindered by an ambiguous identity. Examining the identity process and how it is negotiated under these rather unprecedented circumstances may provide new insights for furthering the credibility, longevity, direction, and definitional autonomy of the counselling profession emerging in Canada at the provincial or local level.

In order to build a comprehensive, trustworthy, and enduring portrayal of what counsellors do, how they define themselves, what informs their work, what it is they stand for and stand by in their daily undertakings, there needs to be more knowledge about the construction process. This will entail discovering answers to the ‘how’ of counsellor professional identity specifically looking at the mechanisms, stages, tasks, resources, and construction plans of the building process. The ‘why’ it is important, urgent, and a matter of professional survival or ‘what’ it is (or is not) based on according to various definitions, characteristics, or psychometric measures and establishing ‘who’ counsellors are for purposes of differentiation or status are all important avenues for apprehending identity however, these have not captured the evolving or “iterative element(s) of professional becoming” (Scanlon, 2011, p.

15). This notion of professional identity as a continual, negotiated experience that moves along a learning trajectory where identity is constructed and re-constituted within the context of change offers a way to broaden end-point perspectives that may no longer be suitable for understanding the nature of professions in this twenty-first century world (Wenger, 1998). Globalisation has introduced a much larger competitive market where professional mobility, increasing claims to professional status, and the dawn of a world-wide labour hierarchy necessitate “a constant questioning and reconstruction of the self in a lifetime project” where ongoing adaptability is a key factor (Scanlon, 2011, p. 27). By examining the change experiences of counsellors as they negotiate their professional identity in what is referred to as a “bottom-up” process that involves “addressing the thoughts, feelings, and actions an individual uses to negotiate boundaries” the focus will be on the individual as the agent of change (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008, p. 340).

Purpose and Approach to the Study

The aim of this study was to increase understanding about the process of professional identity construction and to explore this ‘professional becoming’ (Scanlon, 2011) as it was occurring within the context of change, which was the statutory regulation of psychotherapy in the province of Ontario. It explored how this particular group of counsellors interacted, interpreted, and responded to shifts in their practice landscape as they continued to negotiate their professional identity. The intention was to build a descriptive account of how professional counsellors experienced their identity construction process using qualitative methodology and an interpretivist paradigm (Creswell, 2007; Guba, 1990).

A single case design involving a cross-analysis of embedded units was the strategy of inquiry chosen to investigate this instrumental case (Stake, 1994; Yin, 2014). Two theories, chaos theory (Lorenz, 1993) and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) were used to conceptualize and organize the literature informing the research study. Stake (1995) contends that a good case study requires multiple data sources to ensure a strong review of the issue or phenomenon under investigation and to ensure triangulation of the data. The two main data sources included semi-structured interviews and an asynchronous (not live) virtual focus group. There were three additional data sources, which included a demographic questionnaire, participant observation and document analysis. The data collection instruments used during the interviews consisted of a semi-structured interview guide, participant diagramming exercise and a request for a metaphor

from the participants. The data was collected from the virtual focus group through an asynchronous discussion forum hosted on a learning management system called Blackboard Learn™ and participants also undertook a metaphor request along with responding to a graphic elicitation diagram (i.e., a researcher prepared diagram used to foster dialogue). The study utilized a Thematic Network (Attride-Stirling, 2001) to manage and analyze the data. In order to ensure the trustworthiness of findings the research study was subject to member checks, external audit, and data triangulation.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation contains five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the purpose and focus of this study on counsellor professional identity construction. Situating it within the broader context of the counselling profession and government health care regulatory practices, the significance for this study and the particular issues under investigation are outlined. An overview of the methodology and a breakdown of the organization of the dissertation conclude the chapter. Chapter 2 covers the relevant literature on counsellor professional identity looking at how it is articulated, differentiated, substantiated and constructed. The review situates the discussion gradually by placing the topic first within the broad literature on identity before moving to professional identity and then to counsellor professional identity. Chapter 3 provides a detailed explanation of the research design for the study, the conceptual framework and research paradigm, strategy of inquiry, data gathering procedures and the various collection instruments. The data analysis process and measures taken to ensure trustworthiness form the remainder of this third chapter. Chapter 4 summarizes the results of the study following the within, between and across case analysis. Also included is a provisional model to illustrate the dynamic, “processual aspects” of counsellor professional identity construction (Alvesson, 2010, p. 195). The final graphic elicitation diagram and earlier iterations are run through to enrich the findings in a visual format. Chapter 5 offers a discussion of some salient interpretations and conclusions, the limitations found and noteworthy implications of the study. A statement summarizing the contributions to knowledge about counsellor professional identity construction brings the chapter to a close.

Summary

This chapter opened with an explanation of the issue being addressed by the research study, specifically how counsellor professional identity construction is negotiated amid an exogenous change event which was the unfolding of professional regulation for Ontario counsellors. To better situate the discussion, the context and scope of this inquiry was outlined in order to further demonstrate the significance of investigating this rare, unprecedented occurrence of this phenomenon. After clarifying the intent of this study, this section provided an overview of the methodology including the data collection process, instrumentation, analysis procedures and conceptual framework informing the overall inquiry. In preparation for the subsequent chapters an outline of the organizational framework for the dissertation was provided.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview of the literature on counsellor professional identity looking at how it is articulated, differentiated, substantiated and constructed. There will be a section devoted to each of these four themes or domains in the research. The first of these domains will examine the research on articulating counsellor identity to understand what are considered to be key characteristics, definitional parameters, and effective methods to measure the construct. The second domain highlights how counsellor identity is differentiated and distinct from other professional identities. The third domain in the research on counsellor professional identity speaks about the importance placed on substantiating and upholding this identity at the level of the profession and the individual counsellor. And the fourth domain or theme reviews what has been written on how counsellor professional identity is constructed with the inclusion of two related constructs, identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and “professional becoming” (Scanlon, 2011, p. 8) both of which have been discussed in an associated body of research. Although there are areas within the first three domains that have received exhaustive coverage in the counselling literature it is within the third area, the construction of counsellor professional identity that some gaps and openings for the current research study have been found.

Before moving directly to the literature on counsellor professional identity it is important to first draw the focus outward to the larger social science frame on the construct of identity where much of the theoretical and conceptual premises originate. Therefore, the review will open with a brief discussion on identity which, although a fairly broad body of literature, helps to place counsellor professional identity within its provenance. From there the literature review will move inside this frame to the concept of professional identity which has been variably defined across disciplines, theoretical approaches, and socio-cultural contexts. The concept of professional identity is embedded in the disputed and evolving contexts of two related notions, professionalism and “the professions” (as set apart from occupations) so exploring even the tentative parameters of this term are required (Evetts, 2003). Having reviewed these preliminary contexts, this chapter then narrows in on counsellor professional identity as it is understood in the existing literature with special attention to the current provincial context and how it relates to the broader national and international arena. This will be structured using the four domains as

outlined earlier, namely how counsellor professional identity is a) articulated, b) differentiated, c) substantiated, and d) constructed.

Identity

In the most general terms, identity can be defined as the way individuals build and maintain a sense of themselves as distinct from others in their social environment (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). Through a perpetual process of meaning making they re-interpret not only themselves but how others view them to establish their personal identity (Mead, 1934). The self-view is shaped by multiple contexts or influencing elements both internal and external to the person such as life events, belief systems, relationships, circling ideas, significant moments in time, encounters with some place or something along the way, and so much more (Goffman, 1959). These are tried on, rejected, taken up, overlooked, and reinforced during the identification process which is in essence a string of identity acts or claims (Van Maanen, 2010). As Ashforth et al. (2008) state, “identification matters because it is the process by which people come to define themselves, communicate that definition to others, and use that definition to navigate their lives, work-wise or other” (p. 334).

While personal identity corresponds to individual perceptions of oneself relative to but differentiating us from others, social identity involves a recognition that the personal self is compatible and has shared aspects with a particular social group (Jenkins, 1996). Each person holds a number of social identities through their affiliations with organizations, leisure activities, occupations, culture or ethnicity, and in some instances a profession. Identification with social groups may be ascribed, as in gender or achieved, as in medical professional (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Not only are there multiple social identities, but a person may intermittently identify with their profession (e.g., surgeon), discipline (e.g., medicine), and their institution or organization (e.g., hospital, Mayo Clinic) depending on circumstances (Turner, 1975). Although there is common ground concerning some of these basic aspects of identity when it is discussed within many fields such as human relations, social psychology, organizational behaviour, personality psychology, social welfare, education and so forth, there is variability in how it has been conceptualized and more so in light of current trends surfacing across the identity scholarship (Alvesson, 2010; Watson, 2008).

Identity has been conceptualized through a number of theoretical lenses from functionalism, interpretivist to post-modern (Alvesson, 2010; Gioia, 1998; Taylor, 1989) thus providing a flexible frame to investigate a surprisingly broad array of topics some of which touch on business, politics, ethnicity, life purpose, and interpersonal collaboration (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008). Traditional, or what is sometimes referred to as essentialist notions of identity hold that each person has a sound, unyielding, core self that functions in an independent manner despite contact with the social environment (Alvesson, 2010; Collinson, 2003; Watson, 2008). From this perspective identity is “a personal, internal *project of the self* and treated as if it is something to be *worked on*” making identity work something that resides with the individual (Monrouxe, 2010, p. 41; see also Taylor, 1989).

Identity theorists who take a more interpretivist approach believe that identity is always in flux, inextricably engaged with the social environment, and co-constructed during verbal and symbolic interactions with others (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). From this perspective identity is quite multi-faceted, iteratively shaped, and individuals are actively involved in “forming, repairing, maintaining, and strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165; see also Giddens, 1991). Referred to as a non-essentialist position, identity is not about ‘being’ but rather about ‘becoming’ (Ashforth, 1998; Scanlon, 2011). Understanding how individuals craft their identities, examining the relationship between work and self, looking at intentions of meaning-making and what fuels identity work, gives prominence to process over outcome (Alvesson et al., 2008).

The need to remain open to this tentative, evolving perception of identity is premised on the flexibility it offers individuals faced with the disruptive, unsettling inevitabilities of living with the uncertainties and potentialities of contemporary social environments (Alvesson, 2010). This is evidenced in a breadth of literature linking both personal predicaments (e.g., job loss) and social disruptions (e.g., corporate takeovers) to increased identity tensions and the realities of persistent, compulsory identity negotiation whether that involves: medical professionals facing the reconstruction of their role identity (Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007); identity incompatibility with nursing efficiency demands (Kirpal, 2004); restrictions imposed on professional autonomy and agency of teachers (Vahasantanen, Hokka, Etelapelto, Rasku-Puttonen, & Littleton, 2008); identity ambiguity as a fall out from a corporate merger (Corley &

Gioia, 2004); identity uncertainty birthing ideological extremism (Hogg, 2014); social work identity and values undermined by managed care (Carpenter & Platt, 1997); or the identity threat of interprofessional practices for health care professionals (McNeil, Mitchell, & Parker, 2013). This middle position offers a way to address destabilizing factors that make identity construction unexpectedly challenging by drawing attention to process and reframing the identity project as something fluid and open-ended (Alvesson, 2010). Neither Dunne (1995) nor Alvesson (2010) see it as a choice between a “mainly fixed and a predominantly fluid view, nor between a sovereign self and a decentered one” (Alvesson, 2010, p. 195). Using seven metaphorical images (i.e., self-doubters, struggler, surfer, storyteller, strategist, stencil, soldier) to depict an array of self-identity constructs, Alvesson (2010) offers a new vocabulary for researchers to envision and expand ideas for theoretical development in this middle position. Each image refers to a particular theoretical position and how identity construction is then conceptualized. For example, the storyteller image speaks to the “crafting of a narrative of self identity” in keeping with narrative theory while the soldier metaphor emphasizes “identification with social units” more in keeping with social identity theory where the “entitativity” (i.e., in-group belongingness) of the social group is the basis of identity not individual “unicity” (i.e., self-identity claims) (Alvesson, 2010, pp. 203-207; see also Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Giddens, 1991; Hogg, 2014). Creating this wider field with multiple lines of inquiry is compatible and complementary to the theoretical and methodological premises informing this case study involving counsellors about their identity work during a disruption in their social world brought on by regulatory changes. It does so by offering a “smorgasbord” of the various empirical positions on identity that broadens rather than narrows the means of conceptualizing and thus discovering new understanding about identity construction (Alvesson, 2010, p. 212).

Professional Identity

Individuals assert a number of social identities and some pursue a professional identity. Holding a professional identity involves internalizing the collective attributes, ideals, and objectives of a professional group (Ibarra, 1999; Schein, 1978). This is an identification of such depth it becomes part of the self and conceptualized in such a way that it provides firm guidelines for enacting roles, decisions, and behaviours associated with being a professional (Brott & Myers, 1999). Life experiences and the “unique personhood” of the individual

encompassing their “memories, thoughts and plans, desires, values and judgements, family relations, behaviour and action, [their] genetic codes and neural networks, temperament, and so on” are said to influence the professional identity (Kole & de Ruyter, 2009, p. 138; see also Schein, 1978). However the salience of the professional identity can at times override personal identity determinants such as age, ethnicity, or gender, and two examples of this are: being a prominent criminal lawyer while also female and Ukrainian or a mental health therapist starting retirement as a trauma team member overseas (Hogg & Terry, 2000). The personal and professional identities are inextricably woven but the issue of salience in reference to a particular identity dimension as in the case of ideals (i.e., moral practices and virtues such as honesty, respect for human dignity) has been debated in the identity literature (Clark, 2006; Kole & de Ruyter, 2009). For example, being a professional can provide the means to actualize attributes or ideals inherent in one’s personal identity, and in fact some hold the position that these personal values may influence the professional ethics (Kultgen, 1988; Martin, 2000). Kole and de Ruyter (2009) on the other hand believe that personal ideals could interfere with professional objectivity and suggest endorsing collective ideals that honour individual values. Through a process of cooperative endorsement, the tension between the personal and professional ideals are resolved when individuals willingly embrace the norms and values of the group and are able to do so through some unique, personal means (Kole & de Ruyter, 2009).

Professional identity is defined not only in terms of the individual prescription, it is also the outward facing identity of the profession transmitted not only through rituals but the rhetoric that defines and differentiates one occupational group from another (Hall, 1987). This is conveyed during the socialization or member shaping processes when newcomers are made aware of norms, behaviours, values, philosophy, and identity markers (e.g., physician’s stethoscope, a barrister’s robe) that are ascribed (Tierney & Rhoads, 1993). Individuals as professionals claim their identity by way of their profession which has been awarded this status. Legitimate professions (i.e., those entitled to claim special authority) possess a number of defining characteristics that set them apart, and these are rooted in the standards employed by the three learned or archetypal professions, medicine, law and divinity (Evetts, 2003; Friedson, 1983; Larson, 1977). Typically these characteristics include having a recognized expertise in some field, a significant degree of autonomy in the work undertaken, an established code of ethics and conduct with oversight by members of the profession, a substantive body of

theoretical knowledge grounded in research, a calling to service founded on trust and altruism, evidence of a distinct occupational culture and community, and the obligation by way of a social contract to uphold the public good (Friedson, 1984; 2001).

Agreement on what it means to be a professional and the nature of professions has waxed and waned for over a century with a plethora of scholarly literature in multiple disciplines (Esland, 1980; Etzioni, 1969; Flexner, 1910; Friedson, 1983, 1994, 2001; Halmos, 1973; Larson, 1977; Oppenheimer, 1973; Parsons, 1939; Scuilli, 2005) yet bringing little consensus. While some have pursued a broad definition that could be context free (Scuilli, 2005), others see little value pursuing what is nothing more than a title certain occupations claim, often subject to conditions (e.g., social, economic, political) and at opportune times (Dingwell & Lewis, 1983; Evetts, 2006). A sociological analysis of professions and more specifically what constitutes a professional is well beyond the scope and focus of this study, but what is of relevance are increasing challenges to their autonomy and vocational status caused by a regulation and audit culture that is slowly infiltrating the professional sphere (Beck & Young, 2005). These create tensions, impact service delivery, and undermine the personal, internally driven dedication that many view as highly characteristic of those holding professional responsibility (Beck & Young, 2005; Bernstein, 2000). This internal or personal dedication according to Bernstein (2000) is a distinguishing identity attribute of professionals, or “singulars,” who have a “strongly bounded character, which creates the possibility of a ‘purity’ of identity that ‘partakes of the sacred’ ” (Beck & Young, 2005, p. 185). Although he believes that “the sacred face (of singulars) sets them apart, legitimizes their otherness and creates dedicated identities with no reference other than their calling,” he completes the identity picture using the metaphor of a two-sided coin to reflect the self-interest of professionals for power and prestige (i.e., the “profane” face, abuses of privilege) within the opposing face, but as in reality, “only one face (of this coin) can be seen at one time” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 54; see also Beck & Young, 2005).

Challenges to this inwardness, acquired status, and formal structure of what it means to hold the title of a professional are further compounded by growing strains from an ever increasing array of occupational groups or non-professionals, pushing up against the boundaries of a tenuous social closure held by professions (Abbott, 1981; Beck & Young, 2005; Crompton, 1990; Friedson, 2001; Olgiati, Orzack, & Saks, 1998). As Evetts (2003) notes, “it is an attractive prospect for an occupation to be considered a profession and for occupational workers to be

identified as professionals” (p. 396), and the appeal of this prospect is reflected in a surge of research defending claims for professional identity across an ever growing group of occupations that include engineers, accountants, pharmacists, librarians, computer experts, police and the armed forces (Larson, 1977 in Evetts, p. 398-399); nursing (Franco & Tavares, 2013; Kirpal, 2004); journalism (Nygren & Stigbrand, 2014); teaching/education (Clarke, Hyde, & Drennan, 2013; Fuller, Goodwyn, & Francis-Brophy, 2013) and within disciplines like organizational and management studies (Alvesson et al., 2008; Bartel, Blader, & Wrzesniewski, 2007; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Phelan & Kinsella, 2009) . While some literature supports a move toward acknowledging common features and thus rationalizing an erasure of traditionally definitive lines separating professions and occupations (Crompton, 1990; Ryan & Ford, 2010), there is an equal amount voicing concerns about the possible erosion of professional identities due to overlaps in practice scope, role boundary encroachments, and a muddling of responsibilities (e.g., nursing and medicine) (Beck & Young, 2005; McMurray, 2011; McNeil, Mitchell, & Parker, 2013; Sullivan, 2000).

Traditional definitions and historical precedent surrounding professions and what constitutes a professional identity have been well documented and supported in the literature. However, it appears notions of what it means to have a professional identity or definitively secure that identity claim can no longer be presumed outright given socio-economic forces, managerialism and an audit culture weakening professional autonomy, globalization, government intervention through regulation, deprofessionalisation and the restructuring of the workforce (Beck & Young, 2010; Evetts, 2003; Friedson, 2001; Scanlon, 2011). Institutions, organizations, and communities shape professional identity through socialization processes that convey core values, distinguishing features, and role expectations to facilitate identification. Professional identity is also a function of the personal identity narratives of individuals and self-views that are in continual evolution during both intrapersonal and interpersonal moments.

Counsellor Professional Identity

A review of the counselling literature highlights four areas of importance for understanding what has been studied and discussed by researchers on the professional identity of counsellors. The first area articulates what counsellor professional identity is, or is not, by examining the definitions, characteristics, and instruments or measures used for empirically

validating and quantifying core constructs. The second area looks at who counsellors are and what differentiates them from other professional groups focusing largely on the benefits of a unified and recognized identity, concerns about professional status, and fostering their distinctiveness within inter-professional environments. The third area of research looks at ways counsellor identity is substantiated and why discussions about unity, recognition, credibility, and marketplace parity are seen as integral to the longevity and stability of the profession. The fourth area addresses how counsellor identity is created and promulgated during formative training, professional development, and socialization processes. Being that counsellor identity construction is the focus of this study, literature pertaining to the fourth area will be of particular import. Whenever possible, the literature pertaining to counsellor professional identity set within a Canadian context will be featured but the breadth of scholarship resides predominantly within the international context.

Articulating Counsellor Professional Identity

Looking through the counselling literature, it soon becomes apparent that the issue of defining counsellor professional identity has been one of controversy and confusion (Burkholder (2012). It remains an elusive, ever-evolving construct that interferes with the ability of counsellors to clearly articulate their professional identity and hinders a collective understanding just as profoundly (Myers, Sweeney, & White, 2002; Prosek & Hurt, 2014; Spurgeon, 2012). In addition to being somehow an inherent feature of this phenomenon, some of the confusion seems related to the multi-angled approaches taken in the literature, much like the proverbial story of identifying an elephant by its disparate parts while overlooking its entirety. Although it would seem that to comprehensively articulate counsellor professional identity, this would necessitate speaking to counsellor identity (characteristics), professional identity (label or view of self as such), and the parameters of the complete construct, this is more the exception than the rule. For instance, Remeley and Herlihy (2007) outline five essential components in their definition of counsellor professional identity, which are: (a) being knowledgeable about the history of counselling, (b) having a sound awareness of counselling's philosophical foundations, (c) becoming familiar with the roles and functions unique to counsellors and shared with allied health professions, (d) possessing a sense of pride in the profession, (e) taking an active part in professional organization and advocacy efforts, and (f) knowing and abiding with professional

counsellor ethics. Gray (2001) agrees that a sense of pride in the counselling profession is a defining element, while Vacc and Loesch (1987) along with Haverkamp, Robertson, Cairns, and Bedi (2011) endorse many of the components outlined in Remeley and Herlihy's (2007) definition. Pride in the counselling profession, ethical practices, knowledge of the skills, values and philosophy underpinning the discipline, as well as advocacy all appear in the definition of counsellor professional identity within a Canadian context as outlined by Haverkamp et al. (2011) with one extra inclusion, an open attitude toward having a unique (but professional) interpersonal style. Other definitions are perhaps not this comprehensive and describe professional identity looking to one disparate part such as: identity defined by differentiation based on core characteristics (Hanna & Bemak, 1997; Weinrach, Thomas, & Chan, 2001), identity defined by core values (i.e., growth and development) not those belonging to another profession (e.g., social justice/advocacy) such as social work (ACA, 2005; King, 2010; Mellin, Hunt, & Nichols, 2011), identity defined by elements antithetical to foundational precepts (i.e., illness and deficiency) associated with the medical model and diagnostic training because "once internalized, the new psychiatric mind-set may come to dominate the counsellor's professional identity" (Hansen, 2003, p. 102; Swanson, 2010); and identity defined as the establishment of values congruence or resonance with the goal being authenticity (Moore-Pruitt, 1994).

Another approach taken to define counsellor professional identity includes the idea of labelling oneself as a professional and this involves an integration of personal attributes or worldview with the professional components set out during training and professional socialization (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010). Professional identity has been described as a guiding frame that helps counsellors understand their professional role, ethical responsibility, and code of conduct (i.e., professional socialization) but these elements are subject to self-conceptualizations (i.e., person's guiding values) that provide important context (Brott & Myers, 1999). Nugent and Jones (2009) and Burkholder (2012) put forward a similar definition of professional identity that views the professional community as an important context that brings together the attributes of the individual and their training as a counselling professional. Burkholder (2012) provides a model (Professional Identity Expression, PIE) designed to assist counselling students to conceptualize, express, and operationalize their identity by drawing from their personal attributes and professional training. Professional identity is comprised of these two elements, but the particulars of only the personal attributes (i.e., creativity, curiosity, guiding

others) are spelled out in the case studies along with some of the activities or behaviours that could be vehicles for expressing professional identity (e.g., advocacy, training workshops, interprofessional collaboration). Conceptualizing professional identity is the result of personal reflection and accommodation of the environments or contexts where they enact their counsellor identity (Burkholder, 2012). As in the study by Brott and Meyers (1999), counsellors based their professional identity on the particular setting and leaned more toward personal identity attributes as guidelines. This dovetailing of professional identity with the self-view or personal identity has been supported as a defining element of counsellor professional identity and its evolution (Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003; Gibson et al., 2010; Healey & Hays, 2012; Reisetter, Korcuska, Yexley, Bonds, Nikels, & McHenry, 2004; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

Definitions of counsellor professional identity are also embedded within larger discussions or call outs to promote and solidify professional identity to ensure market capture (Calley & Hawley, 2008; Martin & Cannon, 2010; Myers et al., 2002; Swanson, 2010) often focusing on the identity of the profession while providing only a vague description of counsellor professional identity (Dollarhide & Miller, 2006; Gale & Austin, 2003; Hawley & Calley, 2009; Reiner, Dobmeier, & Hernandez, 2013; Spurgeon, 2012). For example, Hawley and Calley (2009) call for a comprehensive strategy to guide and solidify a counselling professional identity that involves five tasks (a) strategic hiring for counsellor programs, (b) lobby for licensure legislation (c) reassess humanistic roots, (d) advance title ownership, and (e) support research that conveys strength of the profession (p. 2). These tasks form an action plan to ensure professional identity can be operationalized and promoted in a timely manner to ensure unity within the profession but no details are provided as to what characterizes the professional identity being transmitted (Hawley & Calley, 2009). Sounding the alarm of a “profession in peril,” Martin and Cannon (2010) call attention to the inconsistencies in counselor education, messaging by professional associations, and rules of licensure and their potential to undermine advocacy for a common (or unified) identity. Counsellor professional identity is invoked within the discussion of lax program accreditation (i.e., recognition in spite of having met only the minimum requirements) and in the pursuit of licensure, further demonstrating its diminished role and how it is being allowed to “sink into unrecognizable and largely irrelevant caretaking,” but no definition is offered here nor in most of this part of the literature (Martin & Cannon, 2010, p. 52).

Elsewhere in the literature the characteristics of counsellors and precepts central to the profession are petitioned to articulate counsellor professional identity. For example, Gazzola et al. (2010) surveyed Canadian counsellors, who were members of a professional association (i.e., Canadian Counselling Association), in order to uncover key characteristics of their professional identity. The portrait emerging from their findings included these features: strong values like altruism and desire to help others, commitment to personal growth and excellence, pursuit of social interaction, and the ability to diversify or adapt to changes in environments as well as clients. In another Canadian study, doctoral students in a counselling psychology program listed institutional training, values congruence, working with clients, clinical experience, and exposure to negative views of the profession as some of the factors that shaped their professional identity (Gazzola, De Stefano, Audet, & Theriault, 2011). Alves and Gazzola (2013) found similar characteristics associated with counsellor professional identity in their study of experienced counsellors related to professional training, work environment, client focus, and ways of relating to others (i.e., understanding the human experience). One feature of counsellor professional identity that surfaces in these and other studies was the commitment to humanistic beliefs found in the relational, value systems, and theoretical approach to practice (Calley & Halley, 2008; Dollarhide & Oliver, 2014; Hansen, Speciale, & Lemberger, 2014; Luke & Goodrich, 2010). Dollarhide and Oliver (2014) explored the prevalence and longevity of the humanistic foundations of counsellor identity and found these were highly valued as in the work of Calley and Hawley (2008) among counselor educators and also for counselling trainees in a study by Nelson and Jackson (2003). Similar humanistic values and beliefs (e.g., compassion, engagement, growth and human potential) were also found to be part of the professional identity of early career counsellors who had pursued leadership experiences with Chi Sigma Iota (CSI) a professional honour society in the field of counselling in a study by Luke and Goodrich (2010).

In an attempt to sharpen the definition of counsellor professional identity a number of instruments have been created to measure this construct (Emerson, 2010; Gray & Remley, 2000; Moore-Pruitt, 1994; Puglia, 2008; Woo, 2013). The Counselor Professional Identity Measure (CPIM) designed by Emerson (2010) was based on the six components outlined by Remley and Herlihy (2007) that define counsellor professional identity (outlined earlier in this section), and unlike other measures geared to assess a specific group of counsellors (e.g., trainees, school counsellors) this instrument covered the full career span and variability of counselling

specializations. The Counseling Profession Scale (CPS) developed by Gray and Remley (2000) examined two constructs, sense of pride in being a counsellor and identification with the profession as components of professional identity, with a group of doctoral students as the test sample. The Counselor Identity Scale (CIS) constructed by Moore-Pruitt (1994) was designed to measure counsellor identity, specifically ego identity as defined by Erikson (1968), and because of this only gave a partial understanding of professional identity. Another measure, the Professional Identity and Engagement Survey (PIES), was developed by Puglia (2008) to investigate three constructs: counselling philosophy, professional activities (i.e., licensing, certification) and professional engagement (i.e., active in professional organizations, advocacy). The CIS and PIES measurement instruments were both completed by Masters-level students in accredited training programs (i.e., CACREP). Woo (2013) constructed the Professional Identity Scale in Counseling (PISC) to measure the professional identity of counselling professionals across all levels of experience and specialized practice similar in scope to the CPIM designed by Emerson (2010). Based on the counselling literature, six factors were chosen: engagement behaviour, philosophy of the profession, professional values, knowledge of the profession, professional roles and expertise, and attitude (Woo, 2013). Although there were some common constructs measured and done so looking beyond small subsets of counsellors (i.e., various levels of experience, specialization, workplace setting) these instruments have not resulted in a precise definition of professional identity perhaps due to the unsettled, shifting parameters of this evolving concept.

Differentiating Counsellor Professional Identity

One issue that has drawn intense debate in the literature on counsellor professional identity has been the appeal to elucidate, highlight and uphold the distinctiveness of counsellors (Dollarhide & Oliver, 2014; Hanna & Bemak, 1997; Hansen, 2007; McLaughlin & Boettcher, 2009; Myers et al., 2002; Weinrach et al., 2001). Taking ownership and having a strong voice that advocates for the unique attributes, perspectives, and contributions of counsellors has been called for as the strongest defence against identity assimilation with other professions (Hansen, 2003). The singularity of the counsellor professional identity rests on its distinctly humanistic approach that is the very essence of counselling practice and source of prominence (Hansen et al., 2014; McLaughlin & Boettcher, 2009). Dollarhide and Oliver (2014) point out how students

and counsellors value and wish to remain loyal to the humanistic foundations of their profession as it is integral to their identity. Yet, some feel the pressure to embrace the medical model because it moves them closer to licensure and financial benefits associated with third-party payment privileges (Chwalisz, 2003; Dollarhide & Oliver, 2014). Reluctantly, some may consider abandoning their humanistic approach in order to gain employment, function in certain practice settings, or secure adequate compensation (McLaughlin & Boettcher, 2009).

While potentially impacting the employment prospects and stability of counsellors, the turn away from humanistic ideals to a more medical, diagnostic oriented model is argued in the literature as problematic for students now faced with incompatible theoretical premises (Hansen, 2003). As Hansen (2003) explains, this incompatibility results in a splintered identity that is problematic for students building their professional self and makes new counsellors more susceptible to adopting the prevailing theoretical system which belongs to psychiatry rather than counselling. Mounting a similar defence, House (2008) sees government and statutory regulation of counselling and psychotherapy as a path leading to the erosion of foundational values like client respect and autonomy once therapy practice falls to regiments of management. He advocates standing up for what differentiates counsellor identity and safeguarding “the delicate, subtle soul-qualities which give therapy practice at its best its uniquely distinctive characteristics” by taking a stance against any intrusion by regulatory and surveillance forces through “principled non-compliance,” defined as a position of “informed resistance and non-cooperation in relation to these forces” (House, 2008, pp. 46-47). Support for this position is seen as one way counselling practitioners could “reaffirm and re-found the enduring perennial quality of the human potential practice” and preserve its value base that daily informs “the actual coal-face work [they] do with [their] clients” (p. 49) (House, 2008).

Fidelity to humanistic principles has not been the only vanguard for securing the distinctiveness of counsellor professional identity from other helping professions. Looking across the literature there have been a number of ideas proposed for establishing a unique counsellor identity that builds on existing tenets or ones which are compatible. Some of these ideas include amalgamating traditional counselling theories (i.e., person-centered, existential, and gestalt) with comparative humanistic theories (i.e., constructivism, multicultural, ecological) (Bauman & Waldo, 1998; Calley & Halley, 2008; Dollarhide & Oliver, 2014). Another idea proposed is to secure a knowledge base that is theoretically unique to counselling (Hanna &

Bemak, 1997; Martin, 1988; Van Hesteren & Ivey, 1990) and perhaps more specific to counselling in Canada, a recognition of diversity and a need for multicultural competencies (Herman, Tucker, Ferdinand, Mirsu-Paun, Hasan, & Beato, 2007; Sue, 2001). Some of the precepts that have been continually supported in the literature for maintaining the border between counselling and other professions are its focus on wellness and healthy development (Hershenson, 1993; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 1999; Mellin et al., 2011; Myers, 1991; Myers & Sweeney, 2008), its focus on the individual, interpersonal work and having more of a practice orientation (Mellin et al., 2011; Wittmer, 1988), and its valuing of prevention as an approach to health (Myers, 1992; Puglia, 2008; Remley & Herlihy, 2007; Romano & Hage, 2000). One route for distinguishing counselling from other professions has certainly been this appeal to the exclusivity of philosophy or orientation but in some instances other professions share similar approaches (Hanna & Bemak, 1997). For example, a number of health care services like nursing have recently adopted a multicultural model of care (Campinha-Bacote, 2002; Seipel & Way, 2006,) and counselling psychologists still consider a developmental perspective part of their professional identity (Goodyear, 2000).

In addition to these external challenges to the foundational aspects of counsellor identity that support its distinctiveness, some have come from within the profession. Take for instance the recent interest in adopting a social justice approach and building counsellor advocacy to “eradicate issues of oppression, privilege, and social inequity” (King, 2010, p. 51; see also Hage, 2003; Speight & Vera, 2008). Historically, counsellors and the profession have focused on the promotion of growth and development at the level of the individual (Mellin et al., 2011) while issues of systemic change, human rights and social justice have typically been the purview of social work (CASW, 2005). Adopting the language and perspective of the social justice movement according to King (2010) could compromise counsellor professional identity which has a rich history of promoting client growth and development rather than transforming social systems. Furthermore, any blurring or re-setting of identity boundaries is not only driven by economic realities, it can also be a move to gain power or status within a professional field (Hansen, 2003). McLaughlin and Boettcher (2009), using a historical example of the identity crisis experienced by osteopaths struggling against the dominance of allopathic medicine, demonstrate how this lack of cohesion in a profession gradually erodes and opens the door for

others to absorb the unguarded identity or downgrade it's status which is often hard to reverse (see also Howell, 1999).

Some areas of tension over where the counsellor identity lines should be drawn have surfaced over time most notably between educational counselling and counselling psychology (Hanna & Bemak, 1997; Watkins, 1988) and also the conundrum of specialized practice areas such as school counselling, marriage and family therapy, and career counselling and their role in professional unity (Myers, 1991; Remley, 1995). Being able to draw clear lines around counsellor identity has been thwarted by psychology and in particular counselling or clinical psychology, who are in competition with counselling (Ritchie, 1994), have worked in opposition to counsellor licensure, and contested the legitimacy of counselling training programs (Thomas, 1991; Wittmer, 1988). Counselling psychology has been referred to as the "fraternal twin" to counselling (Thomas, 1991, p. 204) and accused of trying to "live in a divided house" (i.e., between psychology and education) (Watson, 1988, p. 444) as it experiences its own identity confusion. In spite of this ambiguous identity, concerns have been expressed (Hanna & Bemak, 1997; Hiebert, Simpson, & Uhlemann, 1992) about this group's ability to impede the advancement of counsellor identity because of its affiliation with powerful and influential psychology organizations (i.e., CPA and APA). Counselling subspecialties have been viewed as posing a similar level of risk to counsellor professional identity by undermining the formation of a common identity (Gale & Austin, 2003) and becoming a "force for fragmentation" (Myers, 1995, p. 115). Because each of the subspecialties holds their own set of standards for credentials and licensing, training, scopes of practice, and code of ethics (Gale & Austin, 2003) there has been no agreement on a common or shared counsellor identity in spite of repeated calls for unity (Cashwell, Kleist, & Scofield, 2009; Gladding & Newsome, 2004; Kaplan & Gladding, 2011; Myers et al., 2002). Interestingly, in a qualitative study by Mellin et al. (2011) practicing counsellors from a number of specialized practice domains (e.g., community counselling, school counsellors, mental health counsellors) were asked to think about their professional identity and how they would describe themselves as a counsellor (i.e., by population served, by specialty). Mellin et al., (2011) found respondents adopted an identity that supported the unity of their profession over their specialization. Contrary to what has premised much of the debate that has circled within professional organizations and counselling faculties around a lack of apparent

unification, it is clear this was not the case in this study which had intentionally sought the opinions of individual counsellors (Mellin et al., 2011).

Substantiating Counsellor Professional Identity

Contributions to the counselling literature have also concentrated on substantiating counsellor professional identity by demonstrating why it is so important, why the warrant for a unified identity to bring about distinction rather than extinction (Cashwell et al., 2009; Chi Sigma Iota, n.d.; Kaplan & Gladding, 2011), why the necessity of advancing a strategic plan to stave off continuous threats to counselling's identity claim posed by both external and internal influences (Hansen et al., 2014; Hawley & Calley, 2009; McLaughlin & Boettcher, 2009; Reiner et al., 2013), and spelling out why this has relevance for the individual counsellor as well as the profession (Gale & Austin, 2003; Myers et al., 2002). Beginning at the level of the individual counsellor, a sound sense of professional identity is said to provide clarity about how they differ from other helping professionals (Heck, 1990) and decrease role confusion in job settings where roles, tasks, and scope of practice have areas of overlap or exclusion (Pistole & Roberts, 2002). Identity confusion also has implications for professional growth and establishing a sense of belonging as "a professional identity that is consistent with one's work can provide stability and security for early career persons as they continue on-the-job learning and find their niche within the employment setting" (Pistole & Roberts, 2002, p. 8; see also Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Using grounded theory to explore the connections between professional identity and counsellor roles and practices, Alves and Gazzola (2013) found that when counsellors were "unsure about who they were as professionals, then they would likely be unclear on what they were supposed to do with clients" (p. 309). Furthermore, these masters-level counsellors agreed that having an unsettled professional identity could have a negative impact on ethical practice, fostering professionalism, ensuring client well-being, their own self-care, and the overall perception of the counselling profession (Alves & Gazzola, 2013).

Having a weak professional identity makes counsellors vulnerable to competing theoretical and practice protocols of more powerful or dominant professions in the mental health care environment (Hansen, 2003). Findings by King and Ross (2004) on interdisciplinary work among health care professionals have pointed to challenges for professional identity when there is role ambiguity, an erosion of a profession's role or the parameters of the role are extended to

meet demands from the work environment for service provision. Mellin et al. (2011) sought the feedback of 238 practicing counsellors on how they differed from two other helping professions (e.g., social work, psychology), and their findings pointed to the roles, tasks and day-to-day service they provide clients as the most distinguishing aspect of their counsellor professional identity. Interestingly, Mellin et al. (2011, p. 141) found the role of advocacy and social action within the context of “interprofessional and cross-system collaborations” discussed in the counselling literature as a prospective area for counsellor identity expansion (Lopez-Baez & Paylo, 2009) summarily categorized by their participants as belonging to social work identity. Interprofessional collaborations are subject to tensions around status and power when the role and responsibility of each profession remains ambiguous (Engels & Bradley, 2001; King & Ross, 2004). These findings echo concerns expressed by King (2010) that identity extensions have the potential to exacerbate the definitional uncertainty of counsellor identity. Similar concerns have prevailed in the literature (Fitzgerald & Osipow, 1986; Gazzola & Smith, 2007; Hosie, West, & Mackey, 1993; Smith & Drodge, 2001) regarding the diversification of counsellor roles and practice environments as both “a boon and bane” to counsellor professional identity (Neimeyer & Diamond, 2001, p. 50). Canadian counsellors in a survey by Smith and Drodge (2001) listed schools, community, college/university, civil service, medical/rehabilitation, industry and private practice among the work settings and the list of their professional activities (and related roles) included: personal counselling, career, intake/assessment, group work, academic advising, crisis intervention, staff training/development, administration, testing, academic teaching, research and evaluation, family/couples counselling and clinical supervision of others (p. 242). As highlighted by Gazzola & Smith (2007) being adept at finding their place in these vastly different environments and assuming these diverse activities once again blurs counsellor identity at the expense of consumer and interprofessional recognition.

The importance of professional identity extends to the profession as well as individual counsellors, and this is certainly demonstrated by the call from delegates affiliated with the American Counseling Association initiative 20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counselling (2010) which outlines seven principles for unifying the counselling profession (ACA, 2010; Kaplan & Gladding, 2011). The first principle states that it is crucial to have a unified professional identity and Cashwell et al. (2009) clarify this by pointing out how there may be

some overlap in the tasks of counselling across professions (e.g., social work, psychiatry) but there is only “one Profession of Counseling” (p. 60). That being said, even within the profession, attempts to establish a common identity according to Myers et al. (2002) becomes further complicated by the fact that specializations exist and counsellor identity may be connected to role, practice setting, and type of client. Calley and Hawley (2008) also weigh in on this point drawing attention to school counselling and mental health counselling which have historically retained their own distinct identity (i.e., separate professional associations, standards for training and practice) which has in some ways also fragmented the profession. Gale and Austin (2003) also pointed to the substantial variability of training programs, the inconsistency of credentialing, the breadth of counselling specializations, and a disinterest by professional counselling associations to combine forces as factors working against a cohesive identity.

The second principle for advancing the future of the profession states that if counsellors present themselves as a unified profession it will have multiple benefits (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011). Parity with other mental health professions (Calley & Hawley, 2008), professional legitimacy, influence, and status through licensure and regulation (Pistole & Roberts, 2002; Tudor, 2013), the provision of market shelter, augmentation of service use (Alves & Gazzola, 2013; Myers et al., 2002), recognition of counsellors by third-party payers as deserving recipients of fiscal parity (Hawley & Calley, 2009), licensure portability for counsellors to ensure employment flexibility and viable incomes (Reiner et al., 2013), were all cited in the literature as benefits of securing a distinct and unassailable counsellor professional identity. Some of the consequences of not prioritizing the distinctiveness of counsellor identity forecast declining professional credibility (Martin & Cannon, 2010), risking the survival of the profession (Maples, Altekruze, & Testa, 1993; Ritchie, 1994), having counsellors viewed as “the bastard children of psychologists and social workers” (O’Bryant, 1994, p. 38), thwarting legislative advocacy (Myers et al., 2002), and leaving counselling graduates from masters-level training programs to become the “drones of the helping professions in terms of pay scales and professional status” (Hanna & Bemak, 1997, p. 2; see also Lanning, 1988; Wittmer, 1988). A template involving five steps and a list of tasks was outlined by Hawley and Calley (2009) to operationalize professional identity (as outlined earlier) and counselling organizations (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2009; CSI, n.d.; Kaplan & Gladding, 2011) as well as researchers (Myers et al., 2002) have also added the following actions

to this national plan: conducting and publishing research on counselling outcomes and unique approaches (i.e., humanistic), providing access to resources that advocate for clients and profession, and raising visibility of the profession through marketing initiatives.

Constructing Counsellor Professional Identity

What is known about counsellor professional identity has been fairly well articulated, differentiated, and substantiated in the counselling literature. However, the research has been more modest outlining how counsellor professional identity is actually constructed leaning more toward its formation as “a process that eschews endpoint notions of professional being such as those found in novice to expert models” (Scanlon, 2011, p. 8) and often as a subsidiary theme within the broader discussions about counsellor development (Alves & Gazzola, 2011). There are several models of counsellor development and formation where professional identity has garnered either peripheral or an indirect focus within the broader discussion (Gibson et al., 2010; Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Stoltenberg, 1981).

The Counselor Complexity Model proposed by Stoltenberg (1981) examined the developmental aspects of supervision and the progression of trainees from entry to mastery that some previous supervision models had not featured (Ekstein & Wallerstein, 1958; Rogers, 1956). The model is comprised of a four level process where supervisees move from dependency, partial autonomy and then conditional dependency, and finally mastery where the counsellor now brings professional standards and their personal counselor identity together (Stoltenberg, 1981). At each level the counsellor develops greater levels of awareness, confidence and self-definition that concludes (eventually) at level four with a fully integrated counselor identity which now includes the therapist identity, counsellor identity and professional identity (Stoltenberg, 1981). Stoltenberg’s (1981) model is specific to the supervision experience and situation stressors associated with an optimal or comparable environment that supervisees would typically encounter during training (e.g., self-doubt, counter transference). Although this model reflects the nascent and training specific development of a counsellor as well as therapist identity, the progression to greater identity strength and some of the attributes (e.g., autonomy, self-awareness) that are held by professionals, it has a very narrow context (i.e., supervision practice) and is premised on endpoints of mastery. Missing from this model are accommodations for potentially unprecedented, career intrusive events that may constrain or

enhance counsellor identity construction anywhere along the trajectory of becoming a professional (Scanlon, 2011). The new professional, as described by Giddens (1991), is amorphous and someone “who must constantly question and restructure their professional self as a lifelong project, addressing the changing nature of professional knowledge and the socio-economic conditions in which professionals practice” (Scanlon, 2011, p. 21; see also Friedson, 2001).

Loganbill et al. (1982) provide another model of counsellor development also within the context of supervision, but in their third and final stage called Integration (stage one is Stagnation, the second Confusion) there is mention of continued growth for counselors who have obtained both personal and professional maturity. Identity formation is a focus throughout the three stages but with particular emphasis on fostering a theoretical identity, as this is usually an important element for more novice counsellors (Loganbill et al., 1982). However, similar to Stoltenberg’s (1981) model, there are few specific details about the actual construction and negotiation of professional identity beyond what transpires within the supervision context. The progression from identity confusion to clarity that accrues with time and experience for emerging counsellors as discussed in these two models finds congruence with definitions of professional identity found elsewhere in the counselling literature (Auxier et al., 2003; Brott & Myers, 1999), but neither answers some of the identified gaps in the literature on the identity construction process.

An alternative developmental stage model that speaks to counsellor identity was proposed by Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003), and it utilized earlier findings from a qualitative study on therapist-counsellor development (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2001) which were restructured as a six-phase model for counsellor identity development. Their interest was on the professional growth and development of practicing counsellors as opposed to counsellors-in-training. The aim was to search for broad themes rather than the usual focus on stages and to look across the entire life of professionals weighing the influence of personal factors as well as professional ones (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2001). The model outlines six phases as opposed to stages to highlight the incremental, ongoing nature of counsellor development and furthermore, of the 14 themes only one theme speaks directly to the development or formation process of the professional self (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Theme one outlines how professional development brings about higher levels of integration between the professional self and the

personal self (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003) which occurs through a process of professional individuation (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2001). The integration of the personal and professional self was considered to be a significant factor for the overall development of counsellor professional identity not only by Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003) but other researchers as well (Auxier et al., 2003; Gibson et al., 2010; Reissetter et al., 2004). The process is described as a seeking of congruence between the personal and professional self that may involve “shedding values, beliefs, and use of methods which no longer fit the personality and the self as therapist” (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003, p. 27). Two examples are cited to demonstrate how this integration process occurs within counsellor development. The first involved a change in theoretical orientation and the second a personal life experience for the counsellors involved, yet both were discussed in relation to the therapist identity not professional identity (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Unlike previously models of counsellor development this one envisions a continuous process of formation over the entire career and that it can be uneven and punctuated by critical or transforming events eventually moving to a state of mastery as outlined in the sixth theme (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Although this model touches on some of the dynamism of negotiating a counsellor identity in the face of change events, the focus is on the outcomes (i.e., anxiety, dejection) and not the mechanisms or activities that might explain how professional identity is constructed.

A professional identity development model proposed by Dollarhide, Gibson, and Moss (2013), Gibson et al., (2010), and Moss, Gibson, and Dollarhide, (2014) was the product of four separate studies examining professional formation and looking to describe the professional identity transitions of counsellors-in-training, practicing counsellors, doctoral students in counsellor education programs, and counsellor educators. Using a grounded theory approach, Gibson et al. (2010) conducted seven focus groups with 43 counsellors-in-training (before practicum, internship and graduation), half coming from a program with a school counselling focus and the other having a marriage, family and couples emphasis. The purpose of the study was to understand characteristics of the identity development process and describe the transformational tasks that are part of counsellor identity development (Gibson et al., 2010). During the formation of professional identity counsellors are presented with a number of tasks that once accomplished can transform identity and these were: definition of counselling, responsibility for professional growth, and transformation to systemic identity (Gibson et al.,

2010). The identity development process is a time sensitive transformation that involves a progression from external validation, to course work/experience/commitment, and finally self-validation (Gibson et al., 2010). Findings confirmed a number of developmental outcomes associated with professional formation that included: an internalized definition of counselling that corresponds with the professional community, assuming responsibility for professional growth, and the integration of personal and professional identities through self-evaluation (Auxier et al., 2003; Brott & Myers, 1999).

The second study (Dollarhide et al., 2013) in the series examined the professional identity development of 23 counselling doctoral students at various points in their program using a combination of interviews and focus groups. Using a grounded theory approach three transformation tasks were identified: acceptance of responsibility, evolving confidence/legitimacy, and integration of multiple identities (Dollarhide et al., 2013). Findings showed counsellors moved through the transformation or developmental process during three stages of growth that included: external validation, experience (teaching, supervision, research, advising, mentoring), and self-validation (Dollarhide et al., 2013).

Turning to the third study, Moss et al. (2014) examined the transformational tasks involved in the developmental formation of 26 practicing counsellors who worked in school or community-based settings again using a grounded theory approach as well as focus groups as their data collection instrument. A professional identity development model outlining the three tasks practicing counsellors undertook during the formation process included: attitude toward work, energy for work, and becoming an integrated person (Moss et al., 2014). The developmental or transformational process had three stages, external validation, experience/professional development, and self-validation (Moss et al., 2014). Findings that informed the emergent developmental theory showed that professional identity was “transformed in response to completing each task” and the process involved a movement from “idealism toward realism, burnout toward rejuvenation, and compartmentalization toward congruency” (Moss et al., 2014, p. 9).

The tri-part model proposed by these related studies (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Gibson et al., 2010; Moss et al., 2014) shares a similar objective with previous counsellor development models that is, to outline stages or phases that occur during professional formation and to identify some of the characteristics or elements involved in the process. Common to all three

models are the developmental or transformational stages (i.e., external to internal validation of professional self as experience is gained) and the gradual progression toward internalizing a counsellor professional identity (i.e., an integration of personal and professional identity). Similar to Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003) the third study looked across all experience levels, it also sought to isolate fundamental descriptors or constructs (e.g., tasks, stages, life-long process, mastery, client feedback), and there was a common interest in the outcomes or consequences of moving through each of the formative stages. Although the model was not situated within the supervision context like the studies of Stoltenberg (1981) and Loganbill et al. (1982), all three feature a similar finding that counsellor development involves a gradual progression over time where there is increasing personal and professional maturation leading to the achievement of a fully integrated counsellor identity. This model adds to the understanding of counsellor professional development by identifying the role of transformational tasks, some of which were common to all while others were specific to the experience level of counsellors and also how this construct helps to understand the organizational system facilitating the formation process. The work by Gibson et al. (2010) and the model(s) developed through the related studies add to the discussion on counsellor identity development by focusing on professional formation constructs and describing the path to professional acculturation. This process is described as formative with transformative elements (i.e., tasks to be achieved) but primarily to denote the progression toward mastery or some endpoint where integration through self-validation has been achieved. This is verified by the boxed parameters around the model with arrows representing time running up to the perimeter but not continuing beyond that representational endpoint. Professional identity change or movement is presented as linear, progressive and stage specific within this developmental model and missing from this conceptual model are ways of understanding the uncharted dynamics of identity negotiation and construction processes when unprecedented change events or circumstances (i.e., impacting counsellors and/or their profession) disrupt or catalyze professional identity at any point along the life-career trajectory of counsellors.

All of the developmental models were conceptualized with the eventuality of mastery as a professional imperative with the assumption professional identity was also subject to endpoint limits. Only one model mentioned critical incidents or life events interrupting or augmenting movement along the professional trajectory of counsellors (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003) and no mention was made of their impact on identity construction. In the counselling literature only a

handful of studies have examined the impact of critical incidents with either positive or negative valence on counsellor development and professional identity (Fukuyama, 1994; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Heppner & Roehlke, 1984; Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006; Morrissette, 1996; Rabinowitz, Heppner, & Roehlke, 1986; Skovholt & McCarthy, 1988). The definition of critical incidents as “events that stand out as significant markers in an individual’s professional development” or as “developmental turning points” was used by Skovholt and McCarthy (1988) as the collection criteria for a journal issue containing 58 (of 159 submissions) personal accounts submitted by practicing counsellors of all modalities and specialization, across all levels of experience, and those involved in counsellor education and training (p. 69). Incidents shared by these counsellors occurred at various junctures in the course of their professional life-career and were described as “highly fortuitous”, “necessary catalysts”, and “chance occurrences or unintended experiences” that could “prompt individuals into new ‘trajectories’ altering the course of their lives” (Skovholt & McCarthy, 1988, p. 70). Within the categories of critical incidents discussed in this collection individuals discussed client interactions, mentor or modeling stories, vivid academic and professional scenarios, and of particular note catalyzing transitions that brought their professional self to the forefront (Skovholt & McCarthy, 1988). Of mention was a study by Alves and Gazzola (2011) that was not investigating critical incidents of experienced counsellors but rather how they define themselves and the factors influencing counsellor identity however, participants did offer “identifying moments” (i.e., being helpful to a client, taking an ethical stance) and sources of professional identity crisis (e.g., burnout, personal stress, conduct questioned) (p. 199).

Furr and Carroll (2003) reported on the critical incidents of masters-level students in a counselling program and their study definition included “positive or negative experiences recognized by the student as significant because of its influence on the student’s development as a counselor” (p. 483). Four clusters or categories of critical incidents were identified in the study and among these were: existential issues or value conflicts, beliefs or challenges to professional competency, and profound moments of personal and professional growth which influence both professional development and identity formation in early-stage counsellors (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Gibson et al., 2010). Four of the studies also looked at critical incidents for counselling students citing multicultural issues, struggles with confidence and competence, and challenging supervision experiences (Fukuyama, 1994; Heppner & Roehlke, 1984; Morrissette, 1996;

Rabinowitz et al., 1986). Critical incidents were defined by Howard et al. (2006) as “significant learning moments, turning points, or moments of realization by the trainees as making a significant contribution to their professional growth” in their study of novice counselling trainees during their practicum (p. 88). This was the only study that listed professional identity, “trainees sense of themselves as counsellors,” as a category in their findings on critical incidents and there with four content areas: “personal identification with the counsellor role, recognition of new or unfamiliar responsibilities as a result of being a counselor, thoughts about counselling as a career choice and motivation to remain in the counselling profession, and understanding one’s professional identity within the context of training” (Howard et al., 2006, p. 93). With one third of the overall critical incidents cited in this study influencing or directly impacting counsellor professional identity it seems a rather compelling case for some level of inclusion in the discussions on identity development and yet it has been overlooked in most of the counsellor development models discussed.

An incident, as these studies have demonstrated can vary in intensity, import, and origin creating a range of responses from doubt to increased motivation when identity is challenged or unsettled (Hogg, 2014). The central premise of uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2000, 2007) holds 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). An environment of increasing regulation and changes to the remit of health care professions has introduced some of this uncertainty for counsellors and the profession in various locations and at different points in time (Alves & Gazzola, 2013; Handelsman & Uhlemann, 1998; House, 2001; Macleod & McSherry, 2007; Mowbray, 1995; 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 sub-specialties 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 not 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 especially in the case of Ontario (Gazzola & Smith, 2007; Gazzola et al., 2010; Martin et al., 2013). A call for discussion on the rationale and potential repercussions of the impending changes set to affect counsellors in Ontario (anticipated in spring 2015) was recently 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 who were hopeful regulatory changes might bring professional privileges, economic gain and status while others 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). It was evident from the findings that counsellors in Ontario at the time of the study (although not representative of all members) were perhaps not fully informed, prone to speculation or blind faith in advocacy messages made by their professional association, lacked enthusiasm for future registration with the regulatory college unless mandated by their workplace, and subject to the ambiguity, tensions, and controversies of a profession subject to a slowly unfolding regulatory framework (Alves & Gazzola, 2013).

Individuals can experience liminality, the loss of “a self defining connection to an important social domain” (Ibarra, 2007, p. 22, see also Ashforth, 2001; Turner, 1982) or having a sense of being “betwixt and between two states or identities” (Newman, 1999 as cited in Ibarra, 2003, p. 22) and the end result of this “time of confusion, insecurity, or uncertainty is that they feel they have lost the narrative thread of their life” (Ibarra, 2007, p. 7). Events of a critical, unprecedented, personally meaningful nature can become triggers or turning points for gaining deeper insights that crystallize existing identities or lead to a reworking or revision process known outside of the counselling scholarship as identity work (Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra, 2007; Louis & Sutton, 1991; Svenigsson & Alvesson, 2003). Although a sound professional identity can provide “moorings” during these unsettled times, Bartel et al. (2007) offer the notion of the “protean self” as a viable alternative (p. 92). Lifton (1993) portrayed the protean individual as someone who is actively willing in the face of uncertainty, identity ambiguity and liminality to become “highly adaptable, able to adopt whatever role is best suited to the moment” through the use of “meta-competencies that abet proteanism, that is, skills for quickly diagnosing and learning from situations and adopting the necessary persona” (Bartel et al., 2007, p. 93). The moorings of a grounded counsellor identity for example would allow them to move “like a

trapeze artist swinging between platforms” while proteanism (in the face of ongoing uncertainty, change being an inevitability of existence) would provide the competence to sustain “a balancing act between responsive shapeshifting, on the one hand, and efforts to consolidate and cohere on the other” (Bartel et al., 2007, p. 93). Within the existing literature on counsellor identity development and the impact of critical incidents this notion of a protean, adaptive response or 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 (Bartel et al., 2007).

In the counselling literature developmental models provide an adequate explanation of the professional formation process that for the most part follows a linear path with some defining moments or incidents related to the growth, competence, and individuation of the counsellor on their way to mastery. From this perspective a professional identity is acquired or achieved as a by-product of the process and is a more or less stable entity that blossoms from gradual nurturing by supportive constituents (e.g., training programs, mentors, clients, professional colleagues, internship experience, or supervision). Incidents reported as significant were mostly related to this formative process such as burnout, ethical misconduct, or tension spill over to personal relationships (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Howard et al., 2006) but absent in this scholarship is an understanding of how external change events whether additive or subtractive (Albert, 1992) to the stability of professional identity are continually negotiated by counsellors. The introduction of statutory regulation and the unfolding agenda accompanying this external change event has both macro (the profession) and micro (individual counsellor) level implications for the professional identity of counsellors in Ontario who are currently in the thick of what their counterparts are experiencing or have transitioned through (e.g., Australia (Tudor, 2013); United Kingdom (House, 2001); Canada (Bryce, 2012; OCCOQ, 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 look into the dynamics of counsellor identity construction that is 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). Two concepts not present in the counselling literature but gaining traction in the sociology and organizational research are identity work which is the dynamic construction of

personal and professional selves (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and professional becoming which is more “a sense of becoming as an evolutionary, iterative process through which individuals develop a sense of a professional self, a professional identity” (Scanlon, 2011, p. 14). A brief review of the scholarship surrounding each of these perspectives is presented as both contribute to the discussion on substantiating counsellor professional identity.

Identity work. 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 individuals face in the social world where identity is constantly in flux (Chreim et al., 2007; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and reconstruction is almost an inevitability (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 taken up “when routinized reproduction of a self-identity in a stable setting is discontinued and may be triggered by uncertainty, anxiety, questioning or self-doubt,” and “during radical transitions” or “may be prompted or intensified by crisis” (Alvesson et al., 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 re-shaping of the personal, or internal identity dimensions (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Watson, 2008). 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).

A number of constructs associated with identity work have direct relevance to counsellor professional identity construction such as: identification (Ashforth et al., 2008), sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and customization (Pratt et al., 2006). Identification with others and having a sense of belonging through affinity or recognizing oneself within a collective (i.e., “self-

referential”) or in other cases emulation that causes one to change to fit into the group (i.e., “self-defining”) capture the emergent aspects of identity transition (Pratt, 1998, pp. 172-174) that precipitate and reflect identity work with its “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, identity incongruence), “sensegiving” (i.e., guided toward a preferred redefinition of identity) and “enactment” (i.e., use of identity markers like office decor or conforming to certain identity norms) (Ashforth et al., 2008, pp. 342-345; 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: enriching (i.e., deepening, refining identity), patching, (i.e., amalgamating identities to fill gaps) and splinting (e.g., shored up by a previous identity) (p. 246). 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 simplistic suppositions about risk or opportunity stemming from this exogenous event (Beech et al., 2008).

Professional becoming. The notion of professional becoming offers another way of viewing the professional self as “an ever-changing phenomenon never fully realized” and as such “cannot be reduced to the acquisition of knowledge and skills within formal educational environments which are then enacted in a professional workplace” (Scanlon, 2011, p. 14). Following from this, ‘being’ a professional means the individual has achieved the prerequisite level of expertise while viewing professional identity as ‘becoming’ reflects an evolving, iterative route that requires continual adaptation as contexts and circumstances change (Scanlon, 2011). Faced with current changes impacting practice, theoretical perspectives, or remits of authority the professional may at any time “be relegated to the role of a stranger within a professional context ” making everyone a newcomer (Scanlon, 2011, p. 15; see also Schutz, 1964). Professional identity becomes a “negotiated experience” moving along what Wenger (1998) views as a trajectory where identity is “ongoing and pervasive” and this according to Ibarra (1999) involves “negotiated adaptation” (as cited in Scanlon, 2011, p. 15). This conceptualization of professional identity places emphasis on the construction process and the

processual details of the identity work, and also the “identity tactics” employed such as “experimenting with possible selves, developing spiritual identity, leveraging congruence, or transforming identity threats” (Roberts & Dutton, 2009, p. 27).

Integration and Research Questions

Given what is known about counsellor professional identity from the extant literature there is a noticeable absence of any empirical research on the dynamic processes that occur during the construction of counsellor professional identity and furthermore, none that have offered an experiential account by counsellors while it was happening. Previous understandings of identity work have been teased out of professional formation or developmental experiences which provide more of an outcome perspective. Although this contributed greatly to the formation of developmental models outlining the path to professional expertise and mastery they are static snapshots that do not offer the best means for understanding the emergent, negotiated, and chaotic elements of day-to-day identity construction. This is especially significant given the current situation of Ontario counsellors who are going about their identity work during an exogenous change event that has the potential to alter in some manner the way they view themselves as professionals, their current trajectory of professional becoming, the ongoing, emergent growth of their counsellor identity, what they can call themselves, and the areas of practice that will still be within their remit (i.e., authorized area of practice) if they choose, decline or perhaps are not eligible to fall under the regulation title(s) and the restrictions imposed by the Psychotherapy Act when it is enacted. Answers to these unknowns will be sought through a case study that is guided by one overarching research question and three secondary questions.

The main research question of the current study is:

How do counsellors negotiate their professional identity amid changes to the remit of their profession?

The three sub-questions of this research inquiry are:

What do counsellors draw upon to construct, rework or maintain their professional identity during such a change event?

How do counsellors reconcile identity discrepancies if any, and the uncertainty accompanying this period of transition?

How do counsellors portray and narrate this experience of professional becoming?

Summary

This chapter has offered a review of the counselling literature and that of related disciplines to provide a portrait of what is known about counsellor professional identity. It began with a breakdown of each component of this phenomenon to appreciate how each part ‘identity’, ‘professional identity’ and ‘counsellor identity’ had its own scholarship but that each played a role in the holistic understanding. There were four threads in the research literature that highlighted what was currently known about counsellor professional identity and its construction. One area in the literature focused on articulating what constituted counsellor professional identity and how to set definitional parameters. Instruments and measures for empirically validating and quantifying core constructs are still in the early stages and while some consensus around the definition of counsellor professional identity has been growing work remains. Clearing up lingering confusion caused by the lack of a solid, clear declaration of what constitutes counsellor professional identity could facilitate the construction process by making the target identity more succinct. Another thread in the research brought some understanding about counsellor professional identity and how it was differentiated from other helping professions by its unique characteristics and practices but it did not increase knowledge about identity work.

In a similar way, another lens for reviewing the professional identity scholarship chronicled efforts and rationales put forward for substantiating and recognizing the importance of counsellor professional identity but did little to advance understanding about its construction or negotiation. This body of work signals the importance of the task and outcomes associated with the shaping, navigating, and maintenance aspects involved in the construction of a counsellor professional identity but does not offer a full sense of these tangible elements or how they might be drawn upon during this process. The fourth and final thread in the research literature discussed the developmental stages counsellors move through during their professional formation to achieve mastery. Although this part of the research literature offered some significant understanding about how counsellor professional identity was developed or formed,

in contrast to the first three threads or areas, there were still some areas unexplored that might be able to shed light on the topic. The first was a lack of empirical investigation of the actual interactive mechanisms used (e.g., resources, dilemmas, strategies, sense making, and priorities) and details on how counsellors went about their identity work within the context of an exogenous change event such as the introduction of professional regulation (Beech et al., 2008). More specifically, it was not clear how they negotiated their professional sense of self while transitional periods and ensuing tension from unprecedented challenges indiscriminately punctuated their life-career trajectory. Not only were there questions unanswered in the literature about the shaping, negotiation and construction process there was also little mention of counsellor identity as a professional becoming and how they might portray or narrate this experience. Exploring these openings in the literature on counsellor professional identity through a case study of local counsellors (Ontario) in the midst of an exogenous change event (unfolding professional regulation) by gathering experiential accounts of how they construct, shape, portray, and negotiate their identities may also provide unforeseen insights on how to articulate, differentiate, and substantiate this unique identity.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Design

This research study was designed to offer a thorough understanding of how counsellors navigate, negotiate, portray and communicate the construction of their professional identity against the backdrop of a significant change context poised to challenge both work identity and self-concepts (Gecas, 1982). At the time of this study, counsellors in Ontario were proceeding with their identity work amid a climate of uncertainty created by the impending onset of regulatory legislation that conceivably could reshape titles, scopes of practice, and professional roles. Regulation changes came into effect in the province of Ontario in the spring of 2015 after the data collection period had been completed. Consequently, this was a unique opportunity to gather first-hand accounts from counsellors involved in the real-time dynamics of identity “sensemaking” (Weick, 1995) during a transition phase where “the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything as it were, trembles in the balance” (Turner, 1982, p. 44; see also Ashforth, 2001). Furthermore, little is known about the actual processes, reasoning, priorities, strategies, or resources counsellors typically call upon during the construction of their professional identity so, to garner a more detailed description and explore the particularity of this phenomenon a qualitative case study was considered the most appropriate research design. Being set in the contexts of both identity negotiation and change dynamics brings a degree of complexity and an unprecedented opportunity to study the issue of professional identity construction within its natural and socio-historical context. This is an instrumental case chosen because it highlights this particular issue and although there is intrinsic interest in the features of this atypical case the purpose is to gain a better understanding about the target phenomenon, namely professional identity construction (Stake, 1994).

The chapter begins by outlining the philosophical assumptions of an interpretivist paradigm and how taking this approach has influenced the research methodology and design. Following this a brief commentary on the researcher’s life-world experience and how it has influenced aspects of the inquiry strategy will be presented. A qualitative research methodology was chosen for the study and a detailed outline of the characteristics of this perspective along with the supporting rationale is included in this section. Two theories were used to draw in and organize the research literature on the two main topic areas of the study, social identity and

change dynamics both of which claim a significant scope. Chaos theory (Lorenz, 1993), often used as an umbrella concept for approaches that explore nonlinear and dynamic systems, was selected along with social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) which looks at an individual's sense of place or belonging in the social world. A brief summary of both theories is presented along with the rationale for their selection.

In the next section of the chapter the research design is presented starting with its purpose and rationale followed by specifics on the type and categorization chosen. A single case design employing a cross-analysis of embedded units was the strategy of inquiry chosen. This is an instrumental case and the purpose will be to provide a descriptive account of this phenomenon in its real-world context (Yin, 2014). The next two sections outline the rationale for the case selection and itemize the data collection instruments, sources, and procedures. The use of multiple sources of evidence is a hallmark of case study research (Yin, 2014) so a number of these were employed to strengthen credibility and afford a truly holistic account. Face-to-face interviews with metaphor and participant diagramming, observation, document review, a demographic questionnaire, incorporation of graphic elicitation diagramming, and a virtual asynchronous focus group were used to provide lines of evidence for the study. A detailed description of each and their role in the study are summarized along with the rationale used throughout the decision-making process. The study utilized the Thematic Network Analysis process outlined by Attride-Stirling (2001) to manage and analyze the data. Steps used to establish the thematic networks are presented along with a map that outlines the sequencing of each data source within the overall analysis. Finally, the chapter closes with a summary of the validation standards that were applied to ensure the trustworthiness of the research.

Research Paradigm

Central to undertaking a qualitative research study is the practice of identifying the philosophical orientation that underpins and directs the conceptualization process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This is often referred to as a positioning of self and is an important consideration because it sets the groundwork for the research design, guides the research questions, provides the rationale for selecting a qualitative methodology, and defends the choice of inquiry strategy (e.g., ethnography, case study, phenomenology, grounded theory, biography, or hermeneutics) made by the researcher (Creswell, 1998). The interpretivist paradigm and the

epistemological, ontological, and methodological parameters associated with this worldview were considered the most fitting choice for this study. A quick overview of the paradigm and the rationale are presented in this section followed by a brief commentary on how the life-world experience of the researcher also shaped the orientation of the study.

Interpretivist Paradigm

Consideration and selection of a research paradigm not only guides the decision-making and execution of the study but it also signals important assumptions or beliefs about knowledge and the nature of truth that inform the inquiry process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The interpretivist paradigm holds a relativist ontology or view of reality and a subjectivist epistemology about the origin and nature of knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Interpretivists generally believe that meaning and understanding are subjectively established within the context of human experiences and social interactions (Guba, 1990). It is set in the lifeworld or everyday activity of individuals and “in the phenomenological understanding that we carry out our lives, in an intersubjective realm that we experience sensually and know linguistically from moment to moment” and “only know it and understand it through our attempts to meaningfully interpret it” (Angen, 2000, p. 385). This involves an “experiential understanding of action and context” or what is sometimes referred to as *verstehen* which helps the researcher draw closer to a correct interpretation (Stake, 2010, p. 48). These notions align with the purpose of the study which was to gather experiential accounts of participants from their everyday activities and identity work.

From an interpretivist perspective, knowledge claims or ways of knowing emerge from the interaction of the researcher and the researched (i.e., the phenomena or individual) in the form of a negotiated dialogue that brings together local meanings and the values inherent to the researcher (Stake, 2010). This particular process of knowledge construction with its relational locus (Gergen, 1994) is eloquently captured by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) in his “traveler metaphor” which depicts the qualitative interviewer as he/she “wanders through the landscape and enters into conversations with the people he or she encounters” and explores “the many domains of the country, as unknown terrain or with maps” but always “walking along with local inhabitants, asking questions and encouraging them to tell their own stories of their lived world” (p. 48). This concept of the interpretivist traveler informed how this researcher proceeded with the inquiry when drawing on qualitative methods (e.g., interviews, observation, document

analysis) and gathering evidence through unobtrusive, ethically sound means to ensure trustworthiness and integrity (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Stake, 2010).

This study was conceptualized within the philosophical assumptions of an interpretive paradigm which is considered by some to be an overarching approach (Stake, 2010) for all qualitative research while others include or distinguish it from constructivist or naturalistic inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, 2008; Schwandt, 2000). Interpretive approaches give researchers the latitude necessary to understand the mental processes individuals use to make sense of their social world and how they construct meaning through human interactions with self and others (Stake, 2010). Individuals undertake this work through a sensemaking process which is “the primary site where meanings materialize that inform and constrain identity and action” in the face of disruption or potential brought about by change events (Weick et al. 2005, p. 409). This study aims to examine how a particular group of individuals go about the active, dynamic construction of their professional identity which has been referred to as identity work (Ibarra, 1999; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Van Maanen, 1997) by looking through an interpretivist lens to help gather an in-depth knowledge of the activities, resources, struggles, and context specific events that challenge the social identification process (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994) of counsellors. As stated by Weick et al. (2005, p. 416), the “stakes in sensemaking are high when issues of identity are involved” so being able to understand the nuances of how this group of counsellors re-settle their sense of who they are and what they stand for as the identity ground is unsettled by unprecedented change events will be best served by the interpretive tactic of particularization advocated by Stake (1995). A number of important assumptions about identity being multifaceted or “populated” (Gergen, 1991, p. 49), a veritable “parliament of selves” (Mead, 1934; as cited in Weick, 1995, p. 18), a complex and an ever-evolving view of self that is storied (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), an iterative “becoming” (Schutz, 1964; Wenger, 1998) and a “negotiated adaptation” between self and the environment/context (Ibarra, 1999, p. 765) formed a background for this researcher to more effectively explore the unique social realities, interpretations, experiences, meaning-filled actions, and knowledge claims (Guba, 1990; Stake, 2010) held by the participants in this study.

Researcher’s Life-World Experience

Researchers also bring their own backgrounds and associated perspectives to the processes of listening, writing, and interpreting all that transpires between the inquirer and the

researched within an interpretivist paradigm. As noted by McLeod (2001), interpretive research is humanistic, incorporates skills “similar to those used in therapy like eliciting people’s stories, sensitive listening, building up an understanding, and checking it out”, and “holistic, nuanced, personal, contextualized, incomplete – is a knowing that is familiar to therapists” (p. 5). As a counsellor there is special knowledge and awareness as a therapist which informs ways of being and interacting with others as they struggle with meanings and subjective experience. So for me, there was an appreciation and ethical responsibility to acknowledge this awareness while in the role of the researcher just there to ask questions, observe, and listen to the experiential accounts of participants (Stake, 2010).

Further to this point, no assumptions can be made that the researcher can separate who they are from what they know so it is important to acknowledge personal truths will in some way become part of the collaborative construction of meaning/understanding. Empathy is more “a matter of perception than emotion” according to Stake (2010, p. 47) and he proposes that “a qualitative researcher has no choice but to be empathic” (p. 48). This close, deliberate sensitivity to human undertakings is embraced to varying degrees within qualitative research (Breen, 2007; Stake & Trumbull, 1982) but this “deep listening through our common humanity” or *verstehen* is what marks interpretivist research as personalistic (Gair, 2012, p. 141; see also Neuman, 2006; Stake, 2010). Situating empathy in this way and walking along side as a curious traveller (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) who encourages the individual to share the story of their life-world is resonant with both counsellor and researcher ways of understanding others and at times requires an extra measure of diligence.

Qualitative Research Methodology

Qualitative research is a way of investigating the meaning of a certain aspect of human experience or a life-world problem that necessitates a degree of immersion and a commitment on the part of the researcher to honour the experiential accounts of participants (Creswell, 2007; McLeod, 2001). This section will highlight some of the important characteristics of qualitative methodology and discuss how these inform and intend to support the knowledge claims of the research study under discussion. The section following this will detail the rationale for adopting a qualitative methodology as the most suitable way to answer the research questions in this study on professional identity construction.

Characteristics

Within the literature on qualitative research there are a number of authors (e.g., Maxwell, 2012; McLeod, 2001; Merriam, 2009; Miller & Crabtree, 1992; Morrow & Smith, 2000) who underscore the salient features of this methodology. For the purposes of discussion these characteristics, as put forward by Corbin & Strauss (2008), Denzin & Lincoln (2005), Creswell (2007), Stake (2010), and Patton (1990), have been summarized to help frame the rationale for taking this approach (see Table 1 in Appendix A for the list of characteristics and their explanations). There were ten characteristics of qualitative research that had particular relevance for this study on counsellor professional identity and what follows is a brief explanation of their role in shaping the methodology.

Naturalistic, field oriented. In order to understand how counsellors went about the negotiation of their professional identity or more concisely, their identity work the researcher engaged in face-to-face meetings with participants to hear their account. Counsellors work in a number of settings (e.g., private practice, educational institutions, government agencies, community outreach) so the researcher followed the participant's lead on fieldwork locale and comfort level for their interviews. As noted by a number of authors (Dickie, 2003; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Van Maanen, 1997), the construction of identity occurs not only in social contexts but also during internal dialogues where self-identity narratives are negotiated. These intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions associated with identity work that take place in real-time allowed the phenomena to be explored within the unique context of a virtual focus group and "conducting research on-line is as close to a natural setting as one can get without conducting participant observation" (Morgan, 1988 as cited in Gaiser, 1997, p. 136).

Emergent design. This was an exploratory study designed to understand a social phenomena that was itself emergent and many qualities that were part of its "dynamism" have yet to be explored due in part to "methodological myopia" (Ashforth et al., 2008, p. 340). For this reason the researcher anticipated that flexibility, responsiveness, and remaining open to unexpected avenues of inquiry would be important as new layers of meaning and understanding surfaced during data collection or analysis.

Interpretive. In order to foster meaning making, intuition, compound ways of seeing and transmitting experiential knowledge about how participants navigate their identity construction against the backdrop of an exogenous change event there needed to be deliberate

thought about which instruments would cultivate particularization and intersubjective understanding. The use of art-based methods and stimulus materials (i.e., participant diagramming, metaphor requests, graphic elicitation prompts) allow different, and at times deeper, understandings to occur for the researcher and respondents (Barry, 1996; Crilly, Blackwell, & Clarkson, 2006). In using “multiple interpretive passes” during researcher-subject interaction “meaning is seen as being intersubjectively constructed, as arising from the interplay between inquiring parties” (Barry, 1996, p. 412).

Researcher as instrument. The image of the researcher as a “bricoleur” who “uses the aesthetic and material tools of his or her craft, deploying whatever strategies, methods, and empirical materials are at hand” (Becker, 1998 as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4) describes the extent of orchestration required to produce a “bricolage” or “pieced-together set of representations that is fitted to the specifics of a complex situation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4). The researcher was part of the research process during the data collection phase which involved observation and interviewing of participants as well as in the role of virtual focus group moderator and manager of the discussion forum. During the analysis and synthesis phase the researcher is instrumental in sorting, managing and converging findings into a final report.

Personalistic. The way researchers situate themselves in relation to the participants whether in the one-on-one interview or as the e-moderator of a focus group involves what Eisner (1991) refers to as a “connoisseur’s sensitivity” that combines intuition, creativity, and responsiveness to the participant’s emerging story (as cited in Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 86). It also means the researcher must continually infuse a judicious amount of objective neutrality with a measureable amount of authentic presence that will encourage the participant to feel at ease about privileging that space with their identity story. This researcher was mindful that during the virtual focus group as opposed to the one-on-one interviews some fine tuning might be needed to ensure this nuanced position. In lieu of some of these pre-identified challenges, consultation was secured with a researcher who had extensive experience in design and delivery of virtual learning programs, facilitating online focus groups, and competence as an e-moderator.

Process tracing. This study like similar qualitative inquiries hopes to discover how the phenomena under investigation works and tries to find out what are some of the mechanisms that destabilize, consolidate, or activate the overall process. A number of processes like deep identification (Rousseau, 1998), sensemaking (Weick, 1995), congruence seeking (Swann,

Johnson, & Bosson, 2009), customization (Pratt et al., 2006), professional becoming (Scanlon, 2011) or the integration of provisional selves (Ibarra, 1999) are often at play when identity work is underway but the aim is to explore, describe, and understand the construction process of the counsellors in this study, in their words.

Holistic understanding. The objective for the qualitative researcher is to be able to provide a wide-ranging picture of the phenomena or issue under investigation in addition to what can be seen upon closer inspection as part of an interconnected web of meanings, contexts, perspectives, or areas of tension so others can grasp what this issue or event is all about. This means not only will a sweeping sense of how professional identity is navigated, shaped, and negotiated by participants within their own life-worlds, workplaces, specialized areas of practice and the larger profession need to be captured, but going deeper into some of the more intricate, symbolic, and metaphorical features that permeate counsellor identity will also be necessary. This was part of the rationale for the use of metaphor requests and participant diagrams in the data collection process.

Inductive data analysis. Stake (2010) describes the analysis to synthesis process as “taking things apart” and “putting things together” (p. 133). The researcher works with individual knowledge “episodes” in order to understand the personal, the particular, and does so from the “ground up” (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2010). Using the experiential data collected during this study this researcher will utilize thematic networks (Attride-Stirling, 2001) to isolate, explore, sort, and interpret findings with an exploratory rather than theory matching or hypothesis testing mindset. Beginning with the coded categories and emergent themes the researcher will look for patterns as well as interrelationships occurring within the data, all the while moving toward higher levels of abstraction (Creswell, 2007).

Purposeful selection. The strategy in qualitative approaches is to find a site, individual, or group who have experience with the issue or phenomena that is perhaps typical, extreme or critical, opportunistic, or provides maximum variation, but mostly that it is “information-rich” (Creswell, 2007, p. 127). For this study there was a purposeful selection of an unusual case that could provide a strong, many-sided, and evocative portrayal of how counsellors negotiate the construction of their professional identity amid looming changes to the remit of their profession.

Data representation. Qualitative researchers look to answer questions about how individuals create and give meaning to their everyday human activities which they in turn

represent in rich, textual narrative that uses persuasive language (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Data is collected in the form of words and images rather than numerical style. As such, this study made use of interviews, document analysis, observation, participant diagramming and metaphor building, a demographic questionnaire, graphic elicitation prompts, and a virtual focus group to gather visual, verbal, and text-based data. These data collection approaches were chosen in keeping with the research objectives, theoretical framework, philosophical assumptions, and the nature of the subject under study but also to allow for a rich representation. Detailed descriptions of the context, issues, activities, actors, and settings in the form of narrative accounts, figures, and tables were provided to help the reader comprehensively visualize what was experienced by participants.

Rationale for Using a Qualitative Approach

The choice of methodology was decided by the research question(s) that are being asked and how to ascertain trustworthy answers in the most efficacious manner. A qualitative approach is fitting when questions are posed for the purpose of understanding ‘what’ and ‘how’ a particular human problem can be understood because certain features, processes, and important meanings associated with the complex phenomena are hard to pin down (Creswell, 2007). An exploratory and discovery driven approach permits the researcher to gain a deep, rich understanding of how participants construct their world and undertake weighty human affairs like identity construction in real-world contexts (Stake, 2010). This study is in the pursuit of a descriptive, experiential account of how individuals negotiate their social self-view as professionals through a period of transition brought on by a significant change event. Questions are posed about processes that are iterative (Schutz, 1964) and in continual motion along a “trajectory” of becoming (Wenger, 1998, p. 56) like negotiation, sensemaking, transitional adaptation, impression management, emulation and enactment which speak to the dynamics of identity work (Beech et al., 2008). Considered one aspect of an individual’s overall “identity project” (e.g., identity as ‘professional’ or ‘parent’), identity work is “concerned with how the images and representations (physical, symbolic, verbal, textual and behavioural) become imbued with meaning” and there are many other elements like identity claims, categorization, self presentation which are part of this complex “melange” (Beech et al., 2008, p. 963). Answers will require depth as opposed to breadth which is more the purview of quantitative experimental methods that seek measurement of frequency, intensity, or quantity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Both approaches try to encapsulate the view of the participant(s) however a quantitative approach relies on “remote, inferential empirical methods and materials” while qualitative researchers tend to draw in, “closer to the actor’s perspective through detailed interviewing and observation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 12). Professional identity is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomena made up of an “enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motive, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves” and form critical self-conceptions, so understanding requires the fidelity of a qualitative methodology to capture its many gradations (Ibarra, 1999, p. 765).

Conceptual Framework

The place of theory in case study although viewed differently by a number of theorists (Creswell, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014) has played a role in this study first by helping to focus and organize the literature search and next in structuring the research questions. This research study used an inductive, bottom-up approach meaning it was grounded in the accounts given by participants as opposed to theory. Acting more as organizing tools, these two theories took on a more auxiliary, inferred role during the data collection and analysis phase by offering “sensitizing concepts” (Patton, 1990, p. 391) and “directions along which to look” (Blumer, 1969, p. 148). A brief outline of the underlying principles of chaos theory and social identity theory will be provided along with the justification for their inclusion in this inquiry process.

Chaos Theory

Chaos theory is a strategy or model for understanding how natural systems both simple (i.e., a falling snowflake) and complex (i.e., the metabolic processes of the human body) are sensitive to unpredictable, non-linear change coming from within and external to the system that can trigger transformation as well as instability (Gleick, 1987). As self-organizing systems individuals, when faced with random disruption (e.g., stress, catastrophe, winning a lottery), try to re-stabilize by making adjustments that are “gradual, segmental, predictable, moderate, and incremental” and if unsuccessful “the continued perturbation will propel movement toward a ‘bifurcation’ – a decision point, a critical choice” (Bloom, 2000, p. 2). This theory has been offered as a way to understand life and career transitions (Bloch, 2005; Pryor, Amundson, & Bright, 2008) by demonstrating how individuals regroup through self-review and planful actions when they are faced with periods of transition brought by unexpected change (Bussolari &

Goodell, 2009). More than just accounting for “diversity, change, synthesis and turbulence” this is a theory of “process rather than state, of becoming rather than being” and many of its constructs are appropriate for conceptualizing and interpreting the findings of this study (Torres Rivera, 2005, p. 109). For instance, identification is a dynamic process used by individuals to define who they are, to transmit their self-definition to others, and to assist them with a life or career course (Ashforth, 2001). It is a process “full of successive disequilibrations” (Marcia, 2002, p. 14), “turning points” (Bullis & Bach, 1989), and “continuities and discontinuities” that precipitate both permanence and change (Grotevant, 1987, p. 203).

Within this theory are a number of premises and key constructs that could ensure positive change and growth frames are given consideration alongside those noticing the tensions usually associated with transitions when unexpected change in organizations and professions occurs such as lay-offs, mergers, or the introduction of regulatory frameworks for professions (Chreim et al., 2007; Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, & Thomas, 2010; Hotho, 2008). For example, a central premise behind chaos theory holds that individuals have the capacity to “maintain integrity in the face of adversity” by conquering stressors or problematic situations triggered during the “complex interaction of environmental influences and life experiences” by renegotiating social or personal identity (Torres Rivera, 2005, p. 114). Terms like adaptation, adjustment, phase transition (moving between the familiar and new), self-organization (moving to higher levels of adaptation in response to unprecedented change), the butterfly effect (minimal random change causing large scale shifts), bifurcations (significant transitional moments noticed often retrospectively), and turbulence (disorder at multiple levels within a system, person and environment interacting) offer helpful ways to understand more deeply some of the dynamic elements of identity construction processes (Bussolari & Goodell, 2009; Torres Rivera, 2005). This theoretical perspective may also assist the researcher during the inductive analysis as themes or patterns become apparent in the data by offering ways to map or visualize some of the more abstract aspects of this process (Patton, 1990).

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory seeks to explain the behaviours, affect, and cognitions of individuals as they position themselves within a particular environment or social context (Ashforth et al., 2008). It guides what they do, how they do it, why they act in a certain way, and what they think about their environment as they interact with others. This process of social

identification where individuals merge attributes of their own identity with those of the collective profession or organization is a dynamic, turbulent, uneven course of becoming that requires conscious management of self-images (Bullis & Bach, 1989; Marcia, 2002).

Building on the works of Ibarra (1999) and Pratt (2000), a conceptual model was proposed by Ashforth et al. (2008) that outlined this process as “a cycle that iterates between organizational sense-breaking and sense-giving and individual identity enactment, sense-making, and identity narrative construction” (pp. 359). As illustrated in the model (see Ashforth et al., 2008, p. 340), the individual begins to add attributes of the collective into their self construct by enacting a number of identities and then assesses the value these bring to their existing identity. Endorsement of this enactment procedure and feedback are provided to the individual through “sensebreaking,” a deep questioning or challenge to the sense of self that motivates identity exploration (Pratt, 2000, p. 464) and “sense giving,” steering people toward the preferred identity attributes (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). Similar to other identity process models, the individual and the organization or profession work together through cycles of affinity, emulation, enacting, sense making, self questioning, and redefinition to reach a negotiated social identity (Grotevant, 1987; Weick, 1995). This model was designed to capture the dynamic aspects of identity change and therefore helped to enhance the exploratory nature of the proposed study. It also helped to direct the focus toward relevant aspects of the fairly expansive literature on social identity theory that would best serve this research study on identity work. Although it acted as an organizational scaffold to assist with some of the conceptual complexity at the nexus of identity negotiation and change dynamics, the model was referenced modestly to ensure it did not constrain the inductive process (Patton, 1990; Stake, 1995).

Research Design

Strategy of Inquiry - Case Study

The literature on case study offers an abundance of perspectives on case study around its place, utility, purpose, definition, and merits which is understandable given its favour, and at times disfavour within a number of disciplines and fields of practice such as: anthropology, law, medicine, history, clinical psychology, organizational management, economics, public administration, social work, management sciences, education, nursing, political science, public policy, and evaluation (Hamel, Dufour, & Fortin, 1993; Yin, 1989). This wealth of viewpoints

on its properties gives way to the “conundrum of the case study” not only in definition but also in its application as a research strategy, a methodology, a design choice, or an express method of doing data collection (Van Wynsberghe & Khan, 2007, p. 81). For instance, Stake (2005) views case study as “a choice of what is to be studied” (p. 438) which may be an issue, a phenomenon, or a certain situation and furthermore the inquiry “attends to the idiosyncratic more than to the pervasive” (Stake, 1978, p. 7). Its merits are realized through experiential understandings of human and social problems made more compelling according to Stake (1978) because they are “down-to-earth and attention-holding” (p. 5). Considering it more as a distinct means of gathering evidence, Merriam (1988) identifies case study as a formula for garnering data that employs a specific group of techniques such as interviews, document /archival record review, and participant observation because they are the most effective method to obtain an appreciation of the phenomenon within its complex context. Yin (2014) articulates a two-part definition of this inquiry approach that takes account of the scope and features of case study in the following manner,

Scope: A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident (p. 16).

Focus: A case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (p. 17).

This fairly broad definition incorporates both method and design aspects of case study inquiry which according to Yin (1989) serves a particular purpose that cannot be fully met by survey, history, archival analysis, or an experiment (p. 17). In spite of the variability in definitions and purpose for undertaking case studies among the predominant researchers who use and write about this line of inquiry, there is a degree of consensus on some of the fundamental elements (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2014). However, this research study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm and therefore will draw more heavily from the constructs, terminology, and methods of case inquiry put forward by Stake (1978, 2006, 2010).

Purpose and rationale for using case study approach. The purpose of case study research is to collect rich, contextualized data on a single individual, a small group of people, or

a discrete event that will lead to a more complete understanding and perhaps new insights (Stake, 1994). It is to get a sense of a contemporary event in a real-life setting through observation, interviewing, and the collection of artefacts without influencing any activities or actors who are part of the case (Yin, 1989). The researcher's intention is to gather a holistic view of the event or subject under investigation by looking purposefully and meticulously at the surrounding context (e.g., political, local, life crisis), significant actors (e.g., interactions, meaning-making, status), and activities (e.g., medical rounds, teaching, identity enactment). Furthermore, case studies are "in complete harmony with the three key words that characterize any qualitative method: describing, understanding, and explaining" (Hamel et al., 1993, p. 39).

Case studies involve the analysis of a bounded system to obtain this level of description which means there is an actual and theoretical border with finite limits where the unfolding phenomena resides (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2006, 2010). A case study can also be used to look more carefully at a problem or entity that eludes definition or has not received an authentic read because other approaches may lack the finesse to collect affect-based, experiential knowledge (Stake, 1978). Applying this distinctly "intensive" (Swanborn, 2010, p. 2) approach provides the researcher with more than paradigmatic knowledge (i.e., general laws, causality), it brings the reader a unique way of knowing "that reflects human purpose and intentionality" (McLeod, 2010, p. 8) making case study a form of narrative knowing (Bruner, 1986, 1990). The case method is a means of comprehending and apprehending the lived experiences of individuals with an emphasis on tacit knowledge (i.e., working knowledge gained from experience, Polanyi, 1983, 1998) as opposed to "definitive truths" (Greenwood & Lowenthal, 2005, p. 186) making their stories rich repositories of unfeigned wisdom and heartfelt insights. These experiences develop into what Stake (1978) refers to as "naturalistic generalizations" which "derive from the tacit knowledge of how things are, why they are, how people feel about them and how these things are likely to be later or in other places with which this person is familiar" (p. 6).

The intention of this research study was to gather contextual, descriptive data on the construction and negotiation of professional identity undertaken by counsellors as little was known about the dynamics that articulate or activate this iterative process (Ashforth et al., 2008; Schutz, 1964). This phenomenon, the crafting of a professional self was intrinsically bounded in an instrumental case of counsellors practicing in Ontario during the current implementation of regulatory changes to the remit of their profession. In order to obtain a holistic view of how

counsellors take on this identity work, this case study intended to examine the surrounding context (e.g., local, own life-world, the profession, practice setting), significant actors (e.g., student/novice/experienced counsellors, counsellor educators), and activities (e.g., mentoring, education, working with clients). The perceptions of counsellors and their experiences navigating the unfolding identity construction process on a day-to-day basis as decisions are made, values reassessed, opinions verbalized, and intermittent episodes of self-reflection took place were each to be explored during the interviews, observation periods, and the focus group. This strategy of inquiry allows the researcher to describe, understand, and look more carefully at the construction process within the context of this fairly unprecedented change event by drawing on the experiential knowing of counsellors and their use of intuitive or tacit knowledge to make sense of their lives. It also provides a more sophisticated method to apprehend the nuances of identity construction, development, and associated notions of professional becoming where negotiation is ongoing or perhaps an endpoint phenomenon (Scanlon, 2011; Wenger, 1998) that other methods (e.g., survey) seeking breadth may have understandably not addressed (Calley & Hawley, 2008; Gazzola & Smith, 2007; Mellin et al., 2011).

Identification of the case and unit of analysis. Once it was determined a case study approach would be suitable to address the research question(s) and meet the research objectives as outlined, the next step taken was the identification of the case. According to Stake (2006, p. 2) “in choosing a case, we almost always choose to study its situation” which involves “learning all of the case out to its boundaries, tracking its issues, pursuing its patterns of complexity” (Stake, 1995, p. 2). Again, this is a study of the identity construction work of counsellors and the researcher is seeking to understand the dynamics of how counsellors negotiate that process (e.g., activities, troubleshooting, communication, resources, portrayal, sensemaking) and to what degree changes in professional regulation influence their identity work. A noteworthy case that could provide insights, help maximize learning, taking place in real-time, and accessible for building understanding about the professional identity construction processes of counsellors was pinpointed (Stake, 1994).

In addition to identifying the case the researcher must also determine the unit of analysis which is the “heart of the case” and occupies a “lower abstraction level than the case layers, and will constitute specific information about the unknown that the research wants to enlighten” (Grunbaum, 2007, p. 88). It is the purpose of the study that ultimately dictates what the unit of

analysis needs to be in order to collect the appropriate information to answer the research questions. A case study can be developed around an individual (e.g., a person with a singular experience), a group (e.g., a classroom of grade one students), an event (e.g., an organizational merger), a geographical unit (e.g., a small Midwestern town), or a process (e.g., corporate identity regulation) (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). The unit of analysis for the case becomes apparent through individuals selected because they can provide information about the phenomenon and “this further means that the unit of analysis is demarcated to be individuals and or actions of individuals” (Grunbaum, 2007, p. 88).

In this research study the main unit of analysis identified was the individual counsellors who are currently practicing in Ontario during the unfolding of statutory regulation of psychotherapy for health care professionals. The purpose of the study was to garner a detailed understanding of how individuals (i.e., counsellors) approach the construction of their professional identity and negotiate this process within a context of unprecedented change. The information needed about this phenomenon is to be found in the experiential accounts of counsellors that will detail the actions they are taking, their thought processes, and meaning perspectives that have evolved as they have negotiated, portrayed, enacted, and navigated their professional self-view. Van Wynsberghe and Khan (2007) see the case study as a “coming to terms” with the unit of analysis which they refer to as being “granular” to represent its frequent refinement over the course of the research (p. 87). For example, in this research study a particular unit of analysis was established from the outset (i.e., counsellors) but this does not preclude the inclusion of other units as a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon occurs. The researcher anticipated there would be a number of subunits of analysis based on the relevant research literature (i.e., professional identity, counsellor identity, exogenous change events) and these acted as tentative structures to guide the process while allowing others to emerge from the data as the study progressed.

Boundaries of the case. The fact that often the separation between the phenomenon and the context is not visibly apparent is a distinguishing feature of the case study (Yin, 1989). Nonetheless, the researcher must ensure the boundaries have been broad enough to touch on all pertinent evidence and that key pieces have been even more thoroughly scrutinized especially giving consideration to any alternate or rival views (Stake, 1978; Yin, 1989). Setting parameters on the case involves a “choice of what is to be studied” (Stake, 2005, p. 443) and the following

criteria are typically used to mark what is in or out of the case: time, context, definitions, processes, issues, setting, activities, (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2006). The boundaries for this research study were identified at the outset to ensure sufficient breadth and depth to include seven criteria (a) time frame, (b) context, (c) definitions (i.e., professional identity, counsellor), (d) processes (i.e., identity work, construction of professional identity, sensemaking, and professional becoming), (e) issues, (f) setting(s), and (g) activities.

Time. The time period marking the beginning and end of this case study was from 2011 to 2013. During this three year interval the full scope of the data collection process transpired.

Context. Some of the notable circumstances and issues of social, historical, personal, and perhaps political import that formed the backdrop for this case study included (a) the recent provincial legislation and implementation of statutory regulation of health care professions, (b) ongoing responsibilities of the counselling profession and professional associations to members, (c) the current and future employment/career trajectories for counsellors, (d) the impact of allied health professions and possible re-stratification, and (e) preserving the distinctiveness of counselling values and its history.

Definitions. Understanding what is meant by professional identity and who or what a counsellor is can be quite variable so a definition of each term is provided to clarify the scope of these within the study.

Professional Identity. This concept is generally characterized as the “relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role” (Ibarra, 1999, p. 765; see also Schein, 1978). Furthermore, it is believed that “professional identity forms over time with varied experiences and meaningful feedback to allow people to gain insight about their central and enduring preferences, talents, and values” (Ibarra, 1999, p. 765).

Counsellor. For the purpose of this study a counsellor was defined as a professional who held, or was in the process of completing a Master’s degree in counselling or some related field where a supervised practicum was required. Counsellors who held a national credential as a Canadian Certified Counsellor or belonged to other certification and licensing bodies that had equivalent credentialing requirements were also included (CCPA, 2010). This case study of counsellors in Ontario therefore included students (currently enrolled in counsellor training

programs), novice counsellors (within first 5 years post-master's degree), experienced counsellors (more than 5 years), and counsellor educators.

Processes. Four social identity processes that are often discussed within the extant literature on professional and organizational identity are outlined briefly. These were not a priori issues but given consideration as sensitizing concepts which could be explored and challenged.

Identity Work. According to Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) identity work is an active process whereby individuals are “engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” and this work “may either, in complex and fragmented contexts, be more or less continuously on-going or, in contexts high on stability, be a theme of engagement during crises or transitions” (p. 1165). More than a means for sorting individuals from social groups (i.e., ‘who I am’ versus ‘who others think I am’) identity work has to do with how “images and representations (physical, symbolic, verbal, textual and behavioural) become imbued with meaning” and bring together a collection or “melange of different identity projects” from past and future identity formations (Beech et al., 2008, p. 52; see also Beech & Huxham, 2003). During identity work certain claims are made through performance, enactment, dress, embodiment, moral stance, and the display of symbols or gestures (e.g., status, verbal discourse) to communicate professional identity (Beech et al., 2008).

Construction of Professional Identity. The term ‘construction’ is defined for the purposes of this study as the course of action taken by counsellors to build and negotiate their professional identity with specific attention to their vision or plan, its procedural steps, the drawing together of tools and resources, troubleshooting methods, and the composition of activities involved in the identity work (Pratt et al., 2006). In order to verify how counsellors form, revise, strengthen, and maintain their identity as it is assembled, the researcher looked at the (a) goals, needs, behaviours, and professional ‘essence’ (i.e., altruism, autonomy) that may be part of shaping the professional self-view; (b) problem-solving strategies, innovative techniques for resolving dissonance at turning points or during critical incidents, and decision-making tools under consideration or that have been tested during periods of transition; (c) the existence of identity narratives and sense making activities (i.e., emulation or sense of affinity with other counsellors) involved in the crafting of counsellor identity; and (d) any patterns of activity that are distinct or

irregular in the overall narrative on how identity construction was built and sustained (Ashforth et al., 2008; Scanlon, 2011).

Sensemaking. The process of sensemaking is set in motion by some unexpected or novel occurrence that has triggered uncertainty and a need for some form of organizational frame to help interpret, reorganize, and assess how to respond (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is both an active response to the environment and others as well as a process of individual contemplation very much grounded in identity construction “strongly motivated by the desires for identity, meaningfulness, control, and belonging” (Ashforth, 2001, p. 66). Individuals engage in sensemaking during their identity construction as they form, repair, maintain, strengthen, or revise their social identities (i.e., professional or organizational self-view) by projecting, observing, and enacting them in different environments (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Ashforth et al., 2008; Weick, 1995).

Professional Becoming. The notion of professional becoming is to view one’s professional identity as an “evolutionary, iterative process by which a sense of professional self is developed” and that it also “eschews endpoint notions of professional being such as those found in novice to expert models” (Scanlon, 2011, p. 8). Individuals negotiate the fit between themselves and their work settings moving along a trajectory of professional becoming or identity construction that continually evolves (Wenger, 1998), there is a “crafting” of the professional self (Ibarra, 1999), and the professional “must constantly question and restructure their professional self as a lifelong project” (Scanlon, 2011, p. 21). Professional becoming is “infused” with the belief in lifelong learning where “mastery is a momentary illusion” (Scanlon, 2011, p. 29).

Issues. A handful of areas were identified as avenues for understanding the complexities, tensions, and intrigue of this case. These issue statements were more curious, tentative wonderings intended to facilitate discovery and interrogate existing assumptions. The researcher considered (a) possible challenges to the remit of the counselling profession posed by regulation statutes, (b) likelihood professional identity was strengthened, disrupted, or constant during this exogenous change event, (c) potential implications of doing identity construction during “liminality” of a suspended transition phase (Ashforth, 2001; Turner, 1982), and (d) the import of depicting identity work as a form of “professional becoming” (Scanlon, 2011).

Setting(s). The prospective venues and surroundings that formed the backdrop for this case study included: rural and urban settings, post secondary education, community practice, private practice, specialized practice, a provincial jurisdiction, the collective of the profession, amid inter-professional collaborations, and within primary health care environments.

Activities. In order to understand the experiences of counsellors as they go about their professional identity construction there was a need to scan for a variety of functions such as role transitions, identity customization, composing intra and interpersonal identity narratives, ongoing training and professional development, identity claims, mentorship opportunities, and determining life-career trajectories often associated with this process (Ashforth, 2001; Ashforth et al., 2008; Ibarra, 1999).

Type and classification of the case. Stake (2006) describes interest in the case as either intrinsic or instrumental. When the researcher wants to understand a case because of an inherent interest in the particulars of that individual, place, or event then it is an intrinsic case study. It is not chosen because it characterizes other cases nor is it singled out to appreciate some issue or establish a general understanding of a phenomenon (Stake, 1995). In an instrumental case study the researcher has an issue or concern needing insight and so selects a particular case because it “helps us pursue the external interest” in more of a “supportive role” (Stake, 1994, p. 237). The case can be either atypical or not as the choice depends on what will best serve the issue or research question. This research study uses an instrumental case to understand and provide insights into the issue of how professional identity construction processes unfold during an unprecedented change event. There will still be a comprehensive examination of the context, activities, and actors of this case but doing so will be “to go beyond the case” in order to understand the issue of interest (Stake, 2006, p. 8).

Single case design with embedded units. The decision to use a single case study over a multiple case study was based on locating the most appropriate source for answering the research questions and one that could provide meaningful evidence (Stake, 2006). Although the statutory regulation of counsellors and other allied health professions has seen some progress across a number of other provinces in Canada (Gazzola et al., 2010) the situation in Ontario is an unusual instance of professional identity negotiation by counsellors and “the descriptive information alone will be revelatory” (Yin, 1989, p. 48). This case possesses an uncommon set of contextual (e.g., limits to scope of practice, title changes, restriction of acts) and temporal (e.g., regulatory

college for psychotherapy being instituted) elements related to the creation and implementation of statutory regulation of health professionals that has implications for counsellors practicing and constructing their identity as professionals while these changes are being slowly unfurled (CRPO, 2015; Government of Ontario, 2007). As mentioned above it was anticipated that a number of subunits of analysis would emerge during the study so a single-case design with embedded units was chosen for this research study. An embedded design has the advantage of focusing the inquiry at the level of the subunit to ensure there is a sufficient measure of depth (i.e., in both content and analysis) while concurrently returning to the single target case to uncover further insights (Yin, 2014). Although the target case in this study acted as an arena or host (Stake, 2006, p. 2) for the embedded units, the enduring interest was to provide a detailed description and interpretation relative to the main case where professional identity construction by counsellors was unfolding.

Data Gathering Procedures

Stake (1995) contends that a good case study requires the researcher to pursue multiple data sources to ensure a strong review of the issue or phenomenon under investigation. This entails the use of several data gathering procedures to help understand the case (Stake, 1995). Informed by the research questions and case study design the researcher might consider using individual interviews or a focus group, participant observation, audio-visual material, documentation, archival records, or even physical artefacts to draw out the particulars of the case (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). Using multiple sources of evidence assures accuracy because it gives rise to “converging lines of inquiry” that allow the researcher to triangulate the data findings (Yin, 2003, p. 100).

In this case study the researcher is investigating a complex, change-producing process (professional identity construction) that contains several features (e.g., attributes, beliefs, values, motives) which are relatively significant for understanding the phenomenon (Ibarra, 1999). For example, some of the dynamics of identity work (e.g., sensemaking, transition, enactment) reside within an internal context (i.e., self-verification, meaning making, life review) and an external context (e.g., identity claims, boundary negotiation, possible selves) which might require the use of sophisticated data gathering techniques to capture these intrapersonal/interpersonal dimensions (Ashforth, 2001; Swann et al., 2009). Interviews (individual and focus group)

provide ways to understand the narrative, reflective processes of identity negotiation while diagrams and metaphors offer techniques to mine deeper, unarticulated meanings and tensions experienced during transition or stable periods (Barry, 1996; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Observation of participant’s workspace and having them draw attention to artefacts of place that communicate their identity as a counsellor and professional in practice is another avenue for data collection being employed (Elsbach, 2004; Pressly & Heesacker, 2001).

Data Sources

The data sources and collection instruments that were used in this study are summarized in Table 1. A synopsis of each data source and a detailed explanation of the design process associated with the data collection instruments specific to each follows.

Table 1

Data Collection Procedures and Instruments

Main Data Sources	Additional Data Sources	Data Collection Instruments
Individual Interviews (Semi-structured Guide)	Demographic Questionnaire Participant Observation Document Analysis	Participant Diagramming Metaphor Request Graphic Elicitation Diagramming
Virtual Focus Group (Asynchronous Discussion Forum)	Demographic Questionnaire	Metaphor Request Graphic Elicitation Diagramming

Note. The primary data collection instrument used for the individual interviews was a semi-structured interview script or guide. An asynchronous discussion forum hosted on a learning management system was the primary data collection instrument used for the virtual focus group.

Individual interviews. The objective in qualitative research interviews is to gain an understanding of the participant’s world by soliciting their point of view and the meanings they assign to their experiences (Stake, 1995). The interviewing approach tends to be more open-ended and semi-structured (i.e., wording and sequencing of guiding questions are not preset) to allow the researcher to respond effectively to the circumstances and expanding ideas being put forward by the respondent as the process unfolds (Merriam, 1988). In this case study the

researcher was seeking to understand the thoughts and meanings counsellors associated with their professional identity work which was best understood through the interchange of dialogue.

Consequently, the researcher used semi-structured interviews to gather detailed descriptions from counsellors on how they undertook their professional identity construction and a data collection instrument in the form of an interview guide (see Appendix B) was developed for this purpose. The development process began with an extensive review of the appropriate literature (e.g., writings on counsellor identity, professional regulation, change management, mental health professions, identity construction and sensemaking processes) and the incorporation of the two identified theories (i.e., chaos theory and social identity theory) to provide a conceptual understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. From this a number of subject areas were chosen for building the semi-structured interview questions needed to explore and elucidate how counsellor professional identity was constructed. The three areas identified were (a) 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. Informed by the main research questions being addressed in the study, the semi-structured interview guide included thirty open-ended questions distributed across the three topic areas and two more detailed questions pertaining directly to the participant diagramming and metaphor request. These questions were designed to invite conversation and make information gathering somewhat systematic across participants; however there was room to offer follow-up questions or probes depending on the direction taken by the informant (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview guide was reviewed by an external investigator knowledgeable in the topic area (thesis supervisor) and then piloted to test the sequencing, wording, and content. Two counsellors who met the inclusion criteria participated in the piloting process. Minor refinements to the interview guide were made primarily to simplify some of the wording and amend how questions were sequenced to improve the overall flow.

Recruitment for the interviews was done through counselling profession list servers, contacting counsellor training programs, community and post secondary counselling centres, professional counselling associations, and government mental health services (see Appendix C for recruitment text). The researcher initiated contact with the program director or executive manager of each to request their cooperation in distributing a recruitment invitation via their membership or counselling staff. The recruitment scope was intentionally broad in order to

facilitate contact with the full range of counsellors residing within the boundaries of the case under study. Prospective interview participants came from community counselling services, internship and training programs, rural and urban settings, primary health care, crisis services, university or college counselling services, addiction treatment centres, outreach services, or private practice. There was no exclusion criteria based on gender, age, ethnicity, or theoretical orientation, however all participants were required to communicate in English as no accommodation for bilingualism could be offered. In harmony with requirements for ethical research involving humans, this project secured the mandatory approval (see Appendix D for ethics certificate) of the Research Ethics Board of the University of Ottawa prior to its commencement. Consent to participate forms were provided to informants (refer to Appendix E) and signed prior to their first interview.

The researcher enlisted 10 counsellors to participate in two interviews (60 and 90 minute respectively) that would be audio-taped. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 66 years with the mean age being 43 (SD= 13.7) and the majority (n=8) identifying as female with only a small representation of male counsellors taking part (n=2). One of the hopes of this study was to be able to include the perspectives of counsellors from all three levels of experience (i.e., student, novice = < 5 years, experienced = > 5 years) in their profession. The interview group contained one student, four novice, and five experienced counsellors. The theoretical orientation predominant among the ten interview participants was client-centered (n=5) with solution-focused and multi-theoretical or integrative being the next two areas with significant representation (n=3). A number of licenses, certifications, and professional memberships were held by study participants (refer to Appendix F). The settings where each of these counsellors were practicing, training, or interning were quite varied with a number in university or college counselling centres (n=6), another group involved in private practice (n=3), one working in community mental health services within a non-profit organization, and a single counsellor working within crisis mental health services. When asked about their professional designation there were a number of titles reported (refer to Appendix F) but the two titles that participants used most often to self-identify were counsellor (n=9) and psychotherapist (n=7) and to a lesser degree counselling therapist and marriage and family therapist (n=3). It was not uncommon for participants to hold more than one designation and also self-identify under a few titles. A more

in-depth picture of each interview participant is provided in the results section as part of the case description.

The researcher began both interviews by welcoming the participants, providing them with a sense of what to expect during the interview (e.g., tasks, general topics areas, timeframe, recording process), giving a brief summary of the study's purpose and role of their interview for the study (Merriam, 1988; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). What is referred to as "setting the interview stage" happens through the opening actions of the researcher (e.g., active listening, respectful stance, genuine interest) and is especially critical when the interviewee is asked to "expose their experiences and feelings to a stranger" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 128). Perhaps this is even more so when the phenomenon under investigation involves self-perceptions and negotiation of social identity as a professional within a transitional context (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Ethier & Deaux, 1994). In order to build trust and put respondents at ease the interviewer conveyed openness to any questions or concerns along the way.

The first interview had two parts with the first being a series of semi-structured interview questions on the participant's sense of professional identity, its construction, and finally how this was communicated (refer to Appendix B). The second half of interview one included a participant diagramming exercise which asked participants to create a summary diagram of how they were constructing and negotiating their professional identity as outlined during the verbal exchange (Umoquit, Dobrow, Lemieux-Charles, Ritvo, Urbach, & Wodchis, 2008). A detailed explanation of what the participant diagram entailed and its purpose is provided in a subsequent section. At this point in the interview the researcher asked participants to walk them through their diagram in order to ensure details and active features were stated in their words. Clarification was intermittently sought by the researcher to deepen understanding of meanings.

The second interview also had two parts, opening with a series of semi-structured interview questions (refer to Appendix B) on negotiating professional identity amid the current change context (current professional regulation). During the second half of the interview participants were invited to offer a visual and/or verbal metaphor that might describe their professional identity construction process and how they were negotiating this within the context of this exogenous change event. Eliciting metaphors is an effective way to encourage participants to draw from their own experiences or use creative image-making to provide rich contextual detail which is a feature and goal in case study research (Deacon, 2000; Schmitt,

2005; Stake, 1995). The researcher asked participants to walk them through their metaphor in order to gather on the spot explanations and interpretations in their words. Clarification was intermittently sought by the researcher to deepen understanding of meanings. An explanation of what the metaphor request entailed and its purpose is provided in an ensuing section. Time was made available during the second interview for participants to review or make refinements to their participant diagram as outlined to them during the directions of the first interview. The time interval between the first and second interviews fell within the range of one to ten days.

Observation. A brief participant observation phase took place at the start of the first interview. During this time the participant was invited to identify any markers which they felt communicated their professional identity as a counsellor such as the presence of physical artefacts (e.g., diplomas, artwork) or environmental indicators (e.g., lighting, furniture placement) (Miwa & Hanyu, 2006; Pressly & Heesacker, 2001). Interpretive researchers approach the construction of meaning and understanding as an intersubjective and intrasubjective process assuming that truths are “negotiated through continuous conversation and dialogue” (Angen, 2000, p. 385; see also Kvale, 1996). Therefore, the stance taken during the observation was that of a “researcher participant” described by Gans (1982) as someone “who participates in a social situation but is personally only partially involved, so that he can function as a researcher” (p. 54). This was accomplished by having the interviewee direct the researcher’s gaze and indicate what they felt needed to be noted. Moving between observation and participation, the researcher purposefully collected data on setting, activities, atmosphere, nonverbal and symbolic factors, and continued to ask for clarification (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995).

Research has indicated that physical identity markers (Elsbach, 2004) and the personalization of workspaces (Elsbach & Pratt, 2008) are important means for developing and communicating social identities in professional or organizational settings. Physical identity markers are “material artefacts that cue and/or affirm a person’s workplace identity” and “signal a person’s distinctiveness and status – the central components of social identity” (Elsbach, 2004, p. 100). These items can be selected to signal a particular professional identity and irrespective of how they are interpreted they will impact image, feelings of satisfaction, and level of productivity (Donald, 1994; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). Included in what is certainly not a definitive list, the following could be considered physical identity markers depending on the

particular workplace and context: furniture, privacy, lighting, artwork, soundproof doors, business cards, atmosphere, office equipment, plants, signage, room layout, and diplomas (Carnevale, 1992; Elsbach, 2004; Elsbach & Pratt, 2008; Miwa & Hanyu, 2006).

These same markers not only message status or distinctiveness they have a strong influence on the development of professional identity as well (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997). One example is the use of dress or clothing markers by medical professionals (doctors and nurses) to denote status and professional values that have an additional benefit of providing greater confidence for enacting their work roles (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997; Wells, 2000). In addition to choosing identity markers the personalization of the workspace by the placement of artefacts also informs others about values, attributes, personal experience, and motives which are part of the “enduring constellation” of factors that individuals use to “define themselves in a professional role” (Ibarra, 1999, p. 765; see also Schein, 1978; Wells & Thelen, 2002). Research studies on how the design of counselling workspace can influence the perception of professional competence and the impact physical setting has on client outcomes both demonstrate the usefulness of collecting data on this dimension (Miwa & Hanyu, 2002, 2006; Nasar & Devlin, 2011; Pressly & Heesacker, 2001).

Document review. Documentary evidence can be written, visual, or virtual material that falls within the personal or public domain (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009). A personal document is a first-person account of certain activities and experiences that are “a reliable source of data concerning a person’s attitudes, beliefs, and view of the world” (Merriam, 2009, p. 143). A public document is material cataloguing some social activity or event that can be openly accessed and has been endorsed or authorized (Creswell, 1998). Documents can provide new insights and information that may not have surfaced during interviews or through other data sources and evidence obtained from documents is especially important in case study research because they can be used to corroborate data findings from another source (Yin, 1989).

Professional identity and its construction can be both a personal and public facing undertaking (Ibarra, 1999) so understandably documents could fall within either domain but the identification of those most salient for understanding the phenomenon belongs to those experiencing it. Therefore, the researcher invited informants during the first interview to consider any documents they felt spoke to their identity construction or negotiation process (e.g., professional portfolios, published articles, project or promotional materials) and these were then

brought to the second interview or forwarded to the researcher at their convenience for inclusion. Interview participants submitted a variety of documents for review and a list of these items can be found in Appendix Q.

Demographic questionnaire. Study informants were asked to fill out a one page questionnaire (refer to Appendix G) prior to their participation in either the interviews or the focus group. It was designed to collect demographic information (e.g., gender, age, professional designation, practice setting, experience level, and other categories). The reason for requesting this information was to provide the researcher with specific details on the context, activities, and actors that could then generate a robust “narrative description” of the case (Stake, 1995, p. 123). This descriptive content is considered “relatively uncontested data” but important for establishing a detailed account of the factual elements of the case (Creswell, 2007, p. 196).

Virtual focus group. A focus group is an organized discussion involving approximately 6-8 participants for the purpose of exploring a designated topic and collecting data generated through an interactive dialogue (Krueger, 1994; Patton, 1990). A series of questions are put forward by the moderator who is responsible for monitoring, facilitating, and recording the verbal exchange of the group but the goal is a proliferation of ideas, not consensus (Murray, 1997). In keeping with interpretive assumptions that meaning and “valid knowledge claims emerge as conflicting interpretations and action possibilities are discussed and negotiated among the members of a community” (Kvale, 1996, p. 239) focus groups become one way to form and review understandings through a generative, deliberated, multi-voiced dialogue (Angen, 2000). This desire to increase the depth of understanding rather than seeking generalization on a topic is compatible with case study intentions of pursuing “particularization” (Stake, 2006, p. 10). A focus group provides any number of accounts and new perspectives on the research topic which can highlight similarities and differences or generate “bonus insights” (i.e., valuable information of an indirect nature) that may not have emerged through individual participant interviews or other means (Gaiser, 1997, p. 141; see also Lim & Tan, 2001). As with all focus groups, care is taken to create a relaxed, non-threatening environment by being moderately directive (to avoid confusion around expectations or undertaking tasks) while carefully intervening in order to open discussions and guard against facilitator bias (Gaiser, 1997). These are some of the benefits and features associated with traditional face-to-face focus groups (Kitzinger, 1995; Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1988) that have influenced and in turn differentiate virtual or online focus groups where

computer-mediated discussions take place via email, bulletin boards, posting forums, instant messaging, chat rooms, listserv, video-conferencing, web-based discussion boards, and newsgroups (Stewart & Williams, 2005; Tate, Zwaanswijk, Otten, van Dulmen, Hoogerbrugge, Kamps, & Bensing, 2009; Walston & Lissitz, 2000). It is to the virtual focus group that the discussion now moves as this was the approach settled upon for this study.

Virtual focus groups are a data collection method that uses computer-mediated communication (CMC) to host and record dialogue, interactions, and in some instances run simulated communication using graphical avatars (Murray, 1997; Stewart & Williams, 2005). The choice of technology begins with a decision to use either an asynchronous approach (not in real time) or a synchronous (in real time) method (Stewart & Williams, 2005). Choosing an asynchronous approach provides “an ongoing website where participants are free to log in during a set period, read each other’s contributions and post a comment themselves at a time that is convenient for them, not necessarily when anyone else is participating” (Tate et al., 2009, p. 2). An asynchronous approach would involve the use of either email-based (e.g., newsgroups, listservs, eforums) or web-based (e.g., web-boards, learning management systems) technology to capture the focus group discussion. The other alternative which more closely approximates a face-to-face experience is the synchronous form where “participants are online simultaneously at a prearranged time, and immediately react to each other’s responses as these are received” (Tate et al., 2009, p. 2). Synchronous focus group communication is mediated through chat rooms, instant messaging programs, virtual reality environments, and multi-user domains that make for a “more chaotic and fast moving” exchange (Stewart & Williams, 2005, p. 403).

The benefits of conducting online or virtual focus groups over offline groups (traditional face-to-face) and utilizing a particular mode (i.e., synchronous versus asynchronous) has been discussed by a variety of authors (Clarke, 2000; Edmunds, 1999; Greenbaum, 1997; Hughes & Lang, 2004; Johnson, 1996; Ruhleder, 2000; Schneider, Kerwin, Frechling, & Vivari, 2002; Sinickas, 2001; Stewart & Williams, 2005; Tate et al., 2009; Wegerif, 1998). A summary of these comparisons (i.e., virtual versus traditional and synchronous versus asynchronous mode) and a more substantive overview of the context behind this aspect of the research design appears in Appendix H.

Based on the research questions and purpose of the study the researcher decided an asynchronous, virtual focus group was the most appropriate data collection method. It was timed

to occur after the interviews in order to facilitate the verification processes (i.e., graphic elicitation feedback, member checking of themes) of the research design. The objective of the study was to elicit rich data from participants on their professional identity construction and a focus group method had the potential to deliver on this by virtue of the lively interactions, evolving perceptions, deeper exploration, and the outpouring of generative insights (Gaiser, 2008; Morgan, 1988, 1998; Wegerif, 1998). Moreover, there were significant benefits as outlined in the overview for conducting the focus group online such as: reaching counsellors in remote locations, making participation convenient (time, cost), and providing opportunity to share experiential accounts without undue influence of face-to-face group (comfort of anonymity) (refer to Appendix H for a more detailed account). In order to address the possibility of technological competence hindering the involvement of participants (Hughes & Lang, 2004) a web-based discussion forum was chosen because of its familiarity (i.e., learning management systems like WebCT or Blackboard are part of post secondary experience), comprehensive tutorial, and online support for new users.

Concerns about the level of commitment from participants in a virtual environment and the challenges of sustaining momentum over the duration of the group required the choice of a suitable timeframe (Hughes & Lang, 2004). Too little time can prevent group cohesion and by its brevity may even conflict with other important commitments; whereas a somewhat longer frame allows more flexibility provided it is not so long a loss of interest sets in for some (Murray, 1997; Stewart & Williams, 2005). Based on these recommendations it was decided that having a pre-set period of fourteen consecutive days while providing ample time each day for posting responses (i.e., between 6:00 a.m. and 12 midnight) could provide flexibility and useful temporal parameters (Turney & Pocknee, 2004). The choice of an asynchronous mode was to allow more time for the participant exchange so responses could be shaped, discussed, enhanced, and would be in keeping with the underlying premises of the study that understand identity construction as an iterative, emergent process (Ashforth et al., 2008; Scanlon, 2011). Although the lively, spontaneity of a synchronous mode can provide a vibrant atmosphere it is also important to consider the compatibility of the discussion topic, data requirements, and research purpose which in this study were better served by an asynchronous mode (Stewart & Williams, 2005). In light of these suggestions, it was decided that working in an asynchronous environment would provide requisite time to undertake some of the more involved elements like

the request for a metaphor (visual or text-based) and a collaborative discussion on a graphic elicitation diagram presented to participants during the focus group.

The online focus group was mediated through Blackboard which is a web-based learning management system used primarily for educational instruction at the post secondary level. Its use as a research instrument for collecting qualitative data has been slowly growing (Hughes & Lang, 2004; Turney, Gilding, Critchley, Shields, Bakacs, & Butler, 2003; Turney & Pocknee, 2004) as a number of educational institutions look for information and communication technologies which can do more than just retrieve, sort, and analyze data for research purposes (Lim & Tan, 2001; Richards & Richards, 1998). Within the Blackboard platform there is a communication feature known as a discussion board which allows the administrator to establish online forums and these can be used to host asynchronous focus groups (Lim & Tan, 2001; Turney & Pocknee, 2004). The University of Ottawa currently utilizes Blackboard as a virtual learning environment and course management system that provides communication and content sharing options with security access (i.e., password protected) for users (e.g., students, academics, administrators). This researcher approached the Centre for Mediated Teaching and Learning to request permission and support to use this system as a data collection instrument for a research study. Encouraged by the success of Turney and Pocknee (2004) and research students at Swinburne University of Technology who used the Blackboard platform to mediate a series of focus groups, the researcher in conjunction with the Centre for Mediated Teaching and Learning (CMTL) personnel and with support from Computing and Communication Services (CCS) undertook this pioneering endeavour and hosted the first virtual focus group on the University of Ottawa Blackboard learning system. The researcher verified that all of the procedures and participant involvement in the virtual focus group hosted on the University of Ottawa Blackboard Learn system met with the requirements of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board before proceeding. System Administrators in the Learning Technology department of CMTL provided the set up and technical support for a password protected course within Blackboard Learn that would host the virtual focus group. A number of sponsored accounts were made available for the focus group participants and passwords were established by the CCS Administrator for the research study. Once consent was received from selected participants the researcher then notified the CCS Administrator who activated the password protected accounts for each of the focus group participants through the security

protected server of the university. The research supervisor for this study and the researcher were registered as instructors and given passwords to access the focus group (course) which offered options like email, a notice board for announcements or updates, a discussion forum, and a homepage with customizable features.

As the focus group instructor the researcher is always working at two levels, first as the moderator in direct communication with participants (posting on the discussion forum and by email) and the second is more behind the scenes where the site designing, daily management, data gathering, and monitoring takes place. Prior to the commencement of the focus group the researcher designed the homepage and site contents which included: information on logging in, daily updates, instructions for posting, a procedural outline (dates, times, daily format), confidentiality and anonymity protocol, technical support and e-moderator contact information, and the discussion board where questions and activities for the fourteen days of the focus group were located (see Appendix I for more detailed overview).

The researcher used the asynchronous discussion forum as a data collection instrument to garner detailed descriptions and interpretations from counsellors about their professional identity construction during the online focus group. To assist with this process a focus group guide (see Appendix J) was designed using the existing interview guide which covered the three topic areas (a) 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. For the purpose of comparison the thirty questions used for the interviews became the basis of the focus group discussions and then follow-up questions or probes were posted by the researcher as well as other members of the focus group. There was no pilot of the focus group data collection instrument as the content had already been tested and refined during the interview process.

The researcher secured the participation of 14 counsellors for the asynchronous discussion forum. The participants ranged in age from 24 to 62 years with the mean age being 44 (SD= 12.8) and the majority (n=13) identifying as female with only one male counsellor taking part. One of the hopes of this study was to be able to include the perspectives of counsellors from all three levels of experience (i.e., student, novice = < 5 years, experienced = > 5 years) in their profession. The focus group was comprised of four students, five novice, and five experienced counsellors. The theoretical orientations most reported by the fourteen focus

group participants were cognitive behavioural therapy (n=10) and client-centered (n=9) with solution-focused (n=6) and narrative therapy (n=5) being the next two areas with significant representation. A number of licenses, certifications, and professional memberships were held by study participants (refer to Appendix F). The settings where each of these counsellors were practicing, training, or interning were quite varied with a number in private practice (n=5), some situated in a university counselling centre (n=5), several working in community mental health services as crisis counsellors and members of a family health team (n=4) and two highlighting they were in a rural environment. When asked about their professional designation there were a number of titles reported (refer to Appendix F) but the two titles that participants used most often to self-identify were counsellor (n=8) and psychotherapist (n=7) and less often as a mental health therapist (n=4) or clinical counsellor (n=3). It was not uncommon for participants to hold more than one designation and also self-identify under a few titles. A more in-depth picture of the focus group participants is provided in the results section as part of the case description.

The focus group participants were recruited using the same procedures taken for the interviews (see Appendix K for the recruitment text). The demographic questionnaire given to the interview participants was also administered and the same inclusion and exclusion criteria were followed for selecting members for the virtual focus group. Consent to participate forms were provided to all fourteen counsellors and signed prior to the commencement of the online focus group (refer to Appendix L). Murray (1997) points out that “mirroring the offline group size may not be appropriate in all circumstances” (p. 545) when designing a virtual focus group, in fact some studies (Robson, 1999; Williams, 2003) have used 45-57 respondents in an asynchronous group which is a ways from the standard offline quota of 6-8 (Patton, 1990). In addition to this consideration of size for comparative purposes, the researcher also needed to weigh the scale of demands (e.g., technical and discussion management) that would fall to them as the sole moderator and administrator. The virtual focus group was intended to provide the opportunity for individual perceptions to be part of a collaborative dialogue on professional identity construction thus providing an alternate (and unique) data source for the study and for comparison purposes the group size was therefore set to closely mirror the interview numbers.

During the fourteen days of the focus group participants were asked for responses to 2-3 questions and encouraged to offer thoughts on postings by other group members. On two

separate days (Day 8 and Day 14) the participants were presented with an additional task, a response to a diagram and a request for a metaphor which is now explained in more detail. Focus group participants were presented on Day 8 with a researcher-prepared visual diagram (i.e., a graphic elicitation diagram) informed by themes emerging from the interviews which included findings from the observation, documents, diagramming, and metaphors. This use of a graphic elicitation diagram was to encourage further contributions and triangulate findings from the thematic analysis of the interview data as a form of member checking (Umoquit et al., 2008). Feedback from the focus group was then used to establish a final version of the graphic elicitation diagram.

Focus group participants were presented on Day 14 with a request for a metaphor that could be visual and/or verbal relative to their identity construction process just as the interview participants had been requested to do (i.e., wording and presentation remained consistent). For focus group participants the metaphor task was undertaken in a virtual space and open to comments or questions by not only the researcher/moderator but other members of the discussion forum. On this final day of the focus group an additional member checking step was included. The researcher presented the focus group participants with the Basic and Organizing Themes that emerged from the online discussions seeking their response on what was resonant, unclear, or missing. The focus group data was analyzed using the same thematic networking method (Attride-Stirling, 2001) applied to all data sources in the study to determine these themes.

Data Collection Instruments

There were three additional data collection instruments used in the interviews and the focus group (a) participant diagramming, (b) metaphor request, and (c) graphic elicitation diagramming.

Participant diagramming. The use of participant-produced diagrams or drawings specifically for data collection purposes in research has seen moderate but growing interest in a number of fields like organizational studies (Meyer, 1991; Vince & Broussine, 1996) and health care treatment / delivery (Umoquit, Tso, Burchett, & Dobrow, 2011) and of particular relevance in studies examining the emotional responses of individuals to organizational and institutional change events (Kearney, 2002; Kearney & Hyle, 2004; Vince, 1995). Participant diagramming involves the use of graphic representations to describe or explain perspectives, experiences,

feelings, relationships, unspoken thoughts, sensemaking processes, or global perceptions and this can be done using a broad variety of strategies and structures (e.g., self-drawings, a mind map, flow chart, timeline, figures, or an action scene) (Barry, 1996; Kesby, 2000). This process is viewed as a combination of ideation, or what McKim (1980) refers to as “visually talking to oneself” and communication, or “visually talking to others” (p. 344). Participant diagrams can be used as an instrument to “contribute to the derivation and analyses of data” and are “especially applicable when dealing with highly complex or sensitive topics which are difficult to communicate about fully through strict verbal exchanges” (Umoquit et al., 2008, p. 2; see also Crilly et al., 2006; Kesby, 2000; Pain & Francis, 2003). Professional identity work has been described as this kind of a process “because the factors that contribute to professional identity are numerous and diverse, both cognitive and affective, and often occur below the level of consciousness, some of them may be difficult to discern or articulate” (White, Borges, & Geiger, 2011, p. 18; see also Monrouxe, 2010).

In this research study participants were asked in their first interview about their sense of professional identity as a counsellor, what was involved in the communication and portrayal of this professional identity, and for a description of how they carried out their identity work (i.e., construction processes, negotiation, resources, strategies, challenges, phases, etc.). At the end of the interview participants were invited to create a visual representation of what they felt were key points offered during the verbal exchange of the interview to ensure these would be accurately captured by the researcher (Kesby, 2000; Umoquit et al., 2008). The participant diagramming exercise was confined to the interviews and not included in the virtual focus group due to online limitations. As part of the study design, the participant diagrams were subject to thematic analysis procedures consistent with those established for managing and interpreting all of the study data.

As identified in the literature (Kearney & Hyle, 2004; Pain & Francis, 2003) an adequate degree of explanation, a modest amount of structure and ensuring sufficient time are all necessary for participants to feel comfortable with the diagramming request. Meyer (1991) points out how the use of “informant-generated displays...are most appropriate for ideographic inquiries treating each informant or organization as a unique entity” especially when the researcher wants to avoid imposing “his or her cognitive framework prematurely” (p. 232). Limiting the amount of structure for the diagramming activity was found by Kearney and Hyle

(2004) to have “encouraged participants to identify whatever component or components of their experiences with change most impacted them” and therefore limit the degree of researcher bias (p. 378). These recommendations were followed in this research study by providing brief but concise instructions on the task, its purpose, materials available, and the time available for the exercise. The researcher offered clarification when asked but was vigilant not to indirectly influence the process by too much direction (Kearney & Hyle, 2004). Participants were informed that during the second interview time was set aside should they wish to give their diagram a final review or some finishing touches. This option was included in the process as a means of moderating the level of researcher-imposed structure relative to time, namely the amount allotted for reflecting and then drawing the diagram.

Metaphor request. A number of studies across a breadth disciplines have incorporated the use of metaphors, both visual and text-based as data collection instruments or a technique for drawing out metaphoric understandings of identity work and sensemaking processes in the areas of career transitions (Barner, 2011; Inkson, 2006), organizational identity (Cornelissen, Oswick, Christensen, & Phillips, 2008; Hatch & Yanow, 2008), teacher identity formation and professional self-image (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011; Zhao, Coombs, & Zhou, 2010), and scholar-practitioner identity (Kram, Wasserman, & Yip, 2012). Metaphors by their intimation open the doors to new ways of seeing the familiar by putting into visual form what is sometimes beyond words (Ortony, 1975) and subsequently “enable individuals to understand complex, nebulous phenomena more easily” (Davidson, 2001 as cited in Pablo & Hardy, 2009, p. 824). By their very nature they elicit subjective interpretation in their creation and bring another layer of representation that “permits an enlightening glimpse” into the meaning and sensemaking processes involved in identity work (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011, p. 764). Not only do metaphors act as a worthy means of soliciting profound, fertile descriptions but as Thomas and Beauchamp (2007, 2011, p.764) have found through their research this approach helps to expand responses beyond just “the what” (i.e., the roles and activities engaged in as a professional) and focus more on “the who” (i.e., the formation process professionals employ). A recognition of the power of metaphors to act as conduits of thoughts and feelings (Knowles & Moon, 2006) and act as heuristic tools is further evidenced by their broad application within the field of counselling by practitioners in their therapeutic work (Amundson, 1988; Lyddon, Clay, & Sparks, 2001), as a

supervision intervention (Guiffrida, Jordan, Saiz, & Barnes, 2007; Young & Borders, 1998), and a tool for theory building (Andriessen & Gubbins, 2009; Inkson, 2004).

Methods for gathering data are selected to address the research questions and be fairly harmonious with the inquiry approach of the researcher (Stake, 2010). As such, symbolic constructivism which is a qualitative framework that uses “art-based symbolization” through drawings, photographs, dramatization, or metaphors to “upend more logocentric, ‘reasoned’ forms of knowing” was included to increase subjective understanding (Barry, 1996, p. 411). This approach allows the researcher to view multiple renderings and explanations of the phenomenon via a range of verbal and visual means understanding that “one interpretive pass can only tell us a little about a symbolizing form” (Barry, 1996, p. 419). It also aligns with qualitative, interpretive assumptions about the “pluralistic and plastic character of reality” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 125) that respects there are many ways individuals intuit, emote and authenticate meanings they assign to their human actions (Barry, 1996).

In light of the fertile outcomes by these previous researchers who took this data collection approach to “articulate subtleties in experience and meaning making” specifically in the area of professional identity (Kram et al., 2012, p. 307; see also Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011) it was evident that the request for metaphors be made to both the interview and focus group participants for the benefit of data verification and triangulation. The metaphor request was scheduled for interview participants during the latter half of their second interview and the focus group members were invited during the final days of the discussion forum to offer a text or visual metaphor. Each of these procedures will now be outlined in more detail as there were some differences in the logistics for delivering this data collection method.

Interview participants were asked at the end of their second interview to consider any visual or verbal metaphors they felt might capture the dynamics of their professional identity work at this present time. To guide the activity the following general explanation of metaphors was provided: Metaphors allow us to draw comparisons between two things that are for the most part not alike yet can be considered similar in one important way; sometimes they can make experiences more meaningful or lucid by transferring the more abstract elements into something concrete (Cade, 1982; Knowles & Moon, 2006; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Cognizant of recommendations for effective and sensitive use of creative data collection methods (Deacon, 2000; Kearney & Hyle, 2004; Meyer, 1991), efforts were made to put interview participants at

ease by letting them know there was adequate time to contemplate, formulate, and describe what they wished to portray in their chosen metaphor. As with all aspects of the interview process, participants were reminded that they were free at any point to pass on a question or any component such as the metaphor request if they chose. In order not to limit their choice to use either verbal or visual avenues to describe their experiences, some drawing materials were made available to the interviewee (i.e., blank paper, coloured markers, and pens). The researcher was present as more of an observer during the reflection and drawing portion and when queried by the informant became interactive by listening to their account and occasionally asking for clarification to secure their interpretation. The rationale being that the potency of the metaphor(s) can be transmitted using a visual or even through verbal imagery but additional depth can come from the “contextual and collaborative discussions and developments that emerge as a result of them” (Vince, 1995, p. 12).

The focus group participants were presented with the metaphor request in a similar manner as the interview participants (i.e., provided a general definition and specifics of the activity; requested on final day of the discussion forum) but the vehicle for conveying it differed. Working within a virtual environment necessitated participant metaphors to be transmitted through the group discussion forum in text-based format with the option of sending any visual metaphors as a file attachment. This allowed the participants of the focus group to have a larger audience for their metaphor presentation and requests for clarification would not be the sole purview of the researcher. Some unexpected layers of understanding from the single person audience (the researcher) as opposed to the collaborative dialogue of the multi-person audience (the researcher and other focus group participants) were anticipated. In keeping with the objectives of case study research, the use of focus groups is often to increase the depth of understanding on a topic or issue and being an asynchronous virtual format it would allow more time for deeper reflection for both respondents and those posting their metaphors (Tates et al., 2009).

Graphic elicitation diagramming. The use of stimulus material in the form of a visual diagram presented to research participants in order foster dialogue and new-found insights is called graphic elicitation (Torronen, 2002). A diagram is prepared by the researcher to conceptualize the evolving interpretation of the data and this is a temporary model, “a work-in-progress that depict(s) *possible* representations of the domain” just awaiting evaluation and

revisions from the study participants (Crilly et al., 2006, p. 360). Selecting the graphic language, degrees of abstraction, and structures used to shape the diagram are carefully considered to avoid being “constrained by an inadequate representation,” to guard against “graphic seduction” by an overly (already) finished diagram, and to respect the visual literacy of research participants (Crilly et al., 2006, pp. 359-360).

Through a process of constant comparison, feedback, revisions, and redesign this prepared diagram is “a reference point for discussion, allowing the elicitation of information that may not have been obtained through questioning alone” (Umoquit et al., 2008, p. 3). Diagrams of this kind have been used as a verification tool, a way to illustrate conclusions, to highlight unnoticed connections, and as a creative springboard (Crilly et al., 2006). As pointed out by Kazmierczak (2001), “diagrams are most suitable for visualizations of conceptual knowledge...modelling reality as we understand it” (p. 177) allowing participants to visualize and communicate perceptions about lived experiences not easily articulated by other means especially with complex topics like identity (McKim, 1980).

This study included the use of a graphic elicitation diagram that was informed by themes from the interview data and a consideration of the structural aspects of the participant diagrams. This required the researcher to examine the data from multiple perspectives, consider a number of visual representation modes, and by “iterating through the graphic ideation process permitted the development of a preliminary graphical framework that was felt to adequately depict the factors involved” (Crilly et al., 2006, p. 354). Use of participant diagramming prior to the graphic elicitation process in previous research has met with positive outcomes and these two methods “represent complementary tools that can enhance data collected through qualitative interviews” (Umoquit et al., 2008, p. 11). As such, the first graphic elicitation diagram was presented to the interview participants for feedback and from this a second version was established. This second graphic elicitation diagram was then introduced to the focus group to prompt new insights and act as a verification tool for emergent themes. Through this member checking process, the focus group participants offered further feedback which was then used to establish a final graphic elicitation diagram. The timing of when to introduce the graphic elicitation diagram was given full consideration as early exposure has the potential to direct thinking and limit the dialogical feature of the focus group (Crilly et al., 2006). With this in mind the researcher chose a midpoint placement allowing the virtual discussion between

participants to be well underway before introducing the graphic elicitation model for their feedback and modification. Using this approach would allow the researcher to gather both individual responses and contributions from the collaborative dialogue on points of contrast, commonality, omission, and newly formed insights from within and across these two data sources (interview and focus group participants).

Data Analysis

Analytic Strategy

Analyzing case study evidence is best facilitated through the development of an analytic strategy, the identification of appropriate techniques to ensure validity, and an efficient data management tool to assist with the process (Yin, 2014). This will ensure that the researcher has “treated the evidence fairly, to produce compelling analytic conclusions, and to rule out alternative interpretations” (Yin, 1989, p. 106). This is not without considerable challenge given there are “no agreed-on canons” on how to analyze or “to make sense of massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal” (Patton, 1990, p. 372).

This research study used an inductive approach for the analysis and interpretation of evidence. Themes and patterns become known or emerge by working the data from the “ground up” meaning they come from categories conceived and verbalized by participants (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1990). Therefore, the researcher remains close to the meanings rendered by the participants and “endeavours to capture and represent voices, emotions, and actions of those studied” particularly attending to “those life experiences that radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their experiences” (Denzin, 2001, p. 1). The data analysis utilized the verbatim transcription of audio-recordings of the interviews, database capture of the online focus group discussions, document and observation records, image data from diagramming tasks (interviews and focus group), and demographic information. There were three integrated parts to the analytic strategy namely (a) the case description; (b) the thematic analysis using networks for coding, displaying, interpreting data; and (c) the case analysis and cross analysis of the embedded units which are explained in more detail in the sections to follow.

Description of the case. The descriptive analysis allows the researcher to answer more general questions about the phenomenon that provide the facts of the case drawn from “a body of

relatively uncontested data” (Stake, 1995, p. 123). For example, a basic question in this study would be, what resources do counsellors use in identity construction? Building the description is usually the starting point of the analysis process and it should be a comprehensive enough picture to put the reader in the researcher’s shoes (Patton, 1990). A detailed description of the particulars surrounding this case included the setting (e.g., sites, actors, artefacts), context (e.g., temporal, personal, political), processes (e.g., communication, identification, impression management), and activities (e.g., incidents, tasks, routines) observed and documented by the researcher (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Stake, 2006). These will contribute to a “thick description” (Denzin, 1989; Geertz, 1973) not devoid of interpretation but enough to allow the reader a solid grasp of the phenomenon for their interpretation (Patton, 1990).

Thematic analysis. Looking for themes in the textual and visual data at various levels of abstraction has been somewhat of a standard approach for qualitative analysis with some variability at times around the techniques and tools used to represent the data (Bryman & Burgess, 1994; Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). It is considered an analytical method that is “independent of theory and epistemology” making it compatible with the interpretivist paradigm informing this study and it is also “a flexible and useful research tool which can potentially provide a rich detailed, yet complex account of data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 5). The thematic analysis method is structured to help the researcher organize a thorough description of the data, to facilitate the identification of themes to be reported, and move toward interpretations that help answer the research question (Boyatzis, 1998). Depth of analytic insights is contingent upon a high degree of familiarization with the data so the researcher carries out their own data collection and transcribes the verbal data (e.g., interviews, observation, focus groups) as this is “recognized as an interpretive act, where meanings are created, rather than simply a mechanical one of putting spoken sounds on paper” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 17; see also Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). Adopting this approach, the researcher collected and transcribed all of the data collected for the current study which provided a deeper immersion and closer reading of the verbatim account (Bird, 2005).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question” and through a stepwise process, themes come to “represent some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 10). Typically, the first stage in a thematic analysis involves finding patterns of meaning within, between and

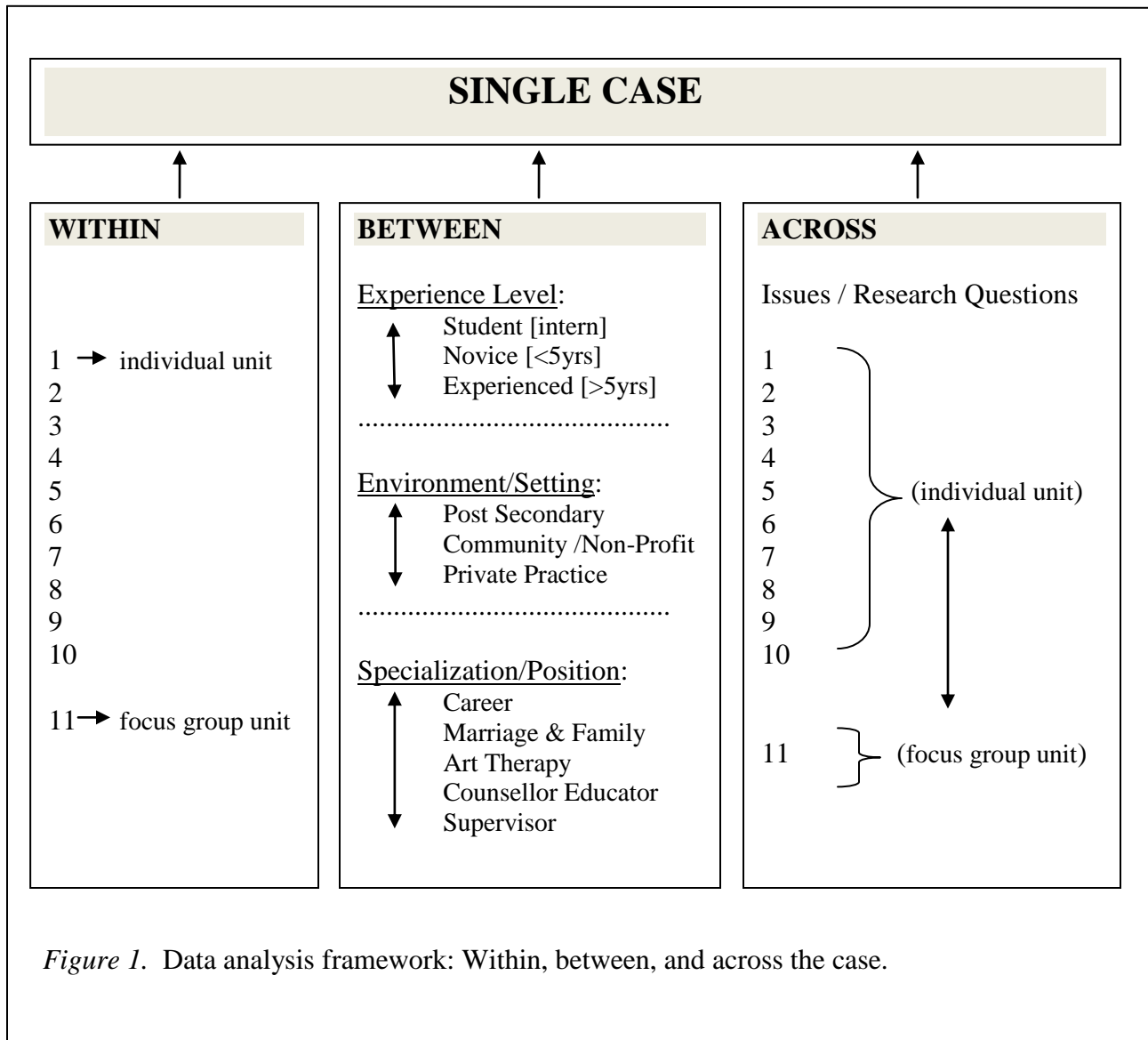
across the data which begins with becoming familiar with the data through transcription and reading (and re-reading) the data with an eye for first insights (Bryman & Burgess, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Then in a systematic manner particular parts of the data are brought together under initial codes with slight variations in technique depending on the conceptual approach taken by the researcher (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011; Miles & Huberman, 1994). These are then grouped under an appropriately relevant theme(s) moving from initial themes, to sub-themes and then to over-arching themes which are often visually mapped to clarify the flow of analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The themes are continually refined to ensure their accuracy and depth of specificity so the final report “compelling(ly) illustrates the story that you are telling about your data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 23). These are the principal steps used in a thematic analysis which can be used in conjunction with more nuanced techniques or means of presenting the data (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to ensure clarity and facilitate the analysis. The thematic analysis process chosen for this study was designed by Attride-Stirling (2001) and integrated the use of analysis networks. Although it had parallel features, structures, and operational principles in common with some of the qualitative analysis techniques mentioned (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994) it offered a unique structural method for analyzing and exploring data.

Thematic Network Analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) involves the use of “web-like illustrations” (p. 386) or networks to organize, explore, and map the relationships between themes or patterns identified during the analysis of the research data. This offers a more sophisticated thematic analysis because it “enables a methodological systematization of textual data, facilitates the disclosure of each step in the analytic process, aids the organization of an analysis and its presentation, and allows a sensitive, insightful and rich exploration of a text’s overt structures and underlying patterns” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 386). Thematic network analysis utilizes three stages, each with a series of steps that facilitate the reduction, exploration, and interpretation of the data with the intention of progressing toward greater levels of abstraction in the analysis. During the stages of this process a number of lower-order themes (Basic Themes) are extracted from the data and these are then grouped under middle-order themes (Organizing Themes) that summarize more abstract levels of meaning. From these a number of super-ordinate themes (Global Themes) that encapsulate what the data findings as a whole are saying emerge from the overall analysis and these are then brought back to help

answer the research questions guiding the study. This step-wise process was employed for the thematic analysis of the entire data set and the researcher also made use of networks to organize and explore the data as outlined by Attride-Stirling (2001, pp. 390-394). A data analysis map outlining how each of the data sets (i.e., the ten interviews and the virtual focus group) and their data items (i.e., observation, documents, verbatim text, participant diagrams, and metaphors) had been sequenced during the thematic analysis and integrated across the span of the study can be found in Appendix R. The analysis map also shows the placement and timing of the graphic elicitation diagram (GE) along with the member checking steps. The demographic data was not subject to thematic analysis but provided information for the case description which appears in the results chapter.

Case analysis and cross analysis of embedded units. In a single case design the target or main case acts as an arena or host (Stake, 2006, p. 2) for its activities, relationships, data sources, and potential subunits. As in this study, the design includes a number of embedded units of analysis which are “a lesser unit than the case itself, for which numerous data points have been collected” (Yin, 1989, p. 121) and these “add significant opportunities for extensive analysis, enhancing the insights into the single case” (Yin, 2014, p. 56). The analysis of an embedded subunit provides standalone interpretations but these findings do not remain independent but are converged to help understand the entire case (Yin, 2003). The enduring interest remains with establishing a detailed description and interpretation of the target case where the phenomenon resides.

In this study a number of subunits of analysis were anticipated based on the research about counsellor professional identity and these acted as tentative structures to guide the analysis along with other embedded units of analysis that emerged unexpectedly from the data. In order to capture multiple layers of understanding about the phenomenon of professional identity construction a thematic analysis of these embedded units was executed. To gather this comprehensive understanding of the case, the researcher began by completing an analysis *within* each of the separate subunits, then turned to exploring the relationship *between* the different subunits, and finally moved to appraising connections *across* all the subunits (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The objective in undertaking this multi-level process was to facilitate a deeper analysis and secure a richer descriptive account. This process is outlined in Figure 1 showing how the within, between, and cross analysis was coordinated.



For the analysis *within* the subunits the researcher examined the themes (Basic, Organizing, and Global Themes) of each individual unit (i.e., individual interview participants from 1- 10) and the focus group unit (i.e., fourteen counsellors that participated in the online discussion forum). Looking to explore the relationship *between* the subunits to enhance insights about the overall case three embedded units that were prevalent in the data findings and the literature (Gazzola et al., 2010; Leinbaugh, Hazler, Bradley, & Hill, 2003; Mellin et al., 2011;

Nelson & Jackson, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992) were chosen: experience level of counsellors, environment or setting where counsellors practiced, and the specialized practice or position held by counsellor. Within each of these subunits a thematic analysis looking at the various data points was undertaken. For example, understanding how professional identity construction was navigated, negotiated, and communicated within the different environments or settings where counsellors worked relied upon observation data, interview text, focus group discussions, participant diagrams, metaphors, and documents provided by study participants who worked in post secondary, community non-profit, or private practice. Wishing to assess connections *across* the subunits at a broader level the researcher pursued a thematic analysis to ascertain commonalities, differences, insights, and relationships across the individual units (e.g., participant 3 and 6), across an individual unit and the focus group (e.g., participant 10 and the focus group unit 11), across the individual units (e.g., participants 1 through to 10) and the focus group (i.e., unit 11). This final level of analysis carried out across the subunits addressed the main research questions as well as the four issue statements mentioned previously. Examining the subunits in this manner provided the researcher with a more comprehensive understanding of the issues of the main case.

Trustworthiness and Triangulation

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of findings in qualitative case studies a number of procedures are used by the researcher. The primary strategy used to increase the validity of interpretations and meanings attributed to the study findings is triangulation (Stake, 1994). The aim is to eliminate issues of subjective bias by the researcher (especially when there is a sole investigator as in this study) and provide avenues to substantiate interpretations by using multiple data sources or techniques to verify emergent findings (Flick, 2002; Stake, 1995). This multi-mode approach makes triangulation an effective means for reducing errors and increasing reliability as errors in one method, once spotted in any of the alternate sources, can readily be corrected (Yin, 1989).

There are four identified types of triangulation (i.e., data, investigator, theory, methodological) that can be used to strengthen the research study (Denzin, 1989; Patton, 1990). Data triangulation involves the use of multiple data sources to understand differences as well as to notice patterns demonstrating some consistency across the data (Patton, 1990). This might

include a comparison between the interview and observation data, an assessment of different points of view held by frontline counsellors versus counsellor educators or supervisors, or looking further into what counsellors say in a face-to-face interview over how they might speak about professional identity within the dialoguing of a virtual focus group. This study had an array of data sources to draw from such as interviews, a virtual focus group, observation, and document review. Each of these offered a different way to capture the issue under investigation and the use of metaphor and diagramming activities provided the opportunity to explore even deeper levels of meaning because they “allow us to forgo symbolic certainty in one domain while remaining comfortably ensconced in another” (Barry, 1996, p. 416). In fact, Richardson (1994) suggests that this approach is less of a triangulation and more crystallization with “an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multi-dimensionality, and angles of approach” for the researcher to come to know the phenomenon (p. 522).

The second kind of triangulation necessitates the use of multiple investigators be these observers, interviewers, or members of a research team to reduce bias (Yin, 2014). Investigator triangulation may occur during stages of the fieldwork when separate teams gather data (Scriven, 1972) but a useful strategy when there is a single investigator (i.e., responsible for all the data collection and analysis) involves the triangulation of investigators where “two or more persons independently analyze the same qualitative data set and then compare their findings” (Patton, 1990, p. 468). In this study the researcher was the sole investigator so an external investigator (i.e., thesis supervisor) analyzed and audited the coding of both the interview and focus group data. The third kind of triangulation calls upon the researcher to bring a theoretical lens or perspective forward to understand the data and as Patton (1990) states, “there are always multiple theoretical perspectives that can be brought to bear on substantive issues” (p. 470). In this study the two theories (i.e., chaos theory and social identity theory) that guided the literature search and development of the research questions was also taken into account at the analysis stage. These two theories offered another means to compare or triangulate perceptions, assumptions, and beliefs about professional identity construction that may not have been immediately considered. Triangulation of methods which is the fourth type usually brings together quantitative and qualitative data collection (Yin, 2014). In this study the researcher included a demographic questionnaire which was not used to gather a different account or means of measuring the issue for comparative analysis (Patton, 1990). It was done to provide

demographic facts or “uncontestable data” that could be used to build the case description (Stake, 1995, p. 123).

Verification strategies for demonstrating trustworthiness also involved member checks that saw the data and tentative interpretations being brought back to the interview participants and the online focus group for their feedback (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The graphic elicitation diagram developed by the researcher was informed by the thematic analysis of the interview data and was subject to member checking by the interview participants. This process allowed the researcher to safeguard against subjective bias and corroborate findings from the thematic analysis done at that point and ensure the graphic elicitation diagram was plausible prior to presenting it to the online focus group for further auditing. The online focus group served a dual role in the study, first as an alternate data source and secondly as a means to triangulate findings from the interviews. Midway through the online focus group participants were presented with the researcher prepared (and interviewee member checked) graphic elicitation diagram for their feedback. In addition to this, member checking was also done by the online focus group during the last day of the discussion forum when participants were asked to audit preliminary themes from the online discussion (from day 1 to 13) identified by the researcher. To further demonstrate the trustworthiness and rigour of the study a process journal was used to log questions encountered during the data collection, decisions made as issues arose, and reflections processed as the analysis unfolded to provide an audit trail (Creswell, 2007).

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the research methodology and design chosen for this study. The rationale for choosing a qualitative case study approach was discussed along with the two theories that were used to guide the conceptual understanding taken by the researcher at various intervals. Following this a detailed explanation of the strategy of inquiry and how the case and its unit of analysis, boundaries, and categorization were established by the researcher was made known. The data sources and collection instruments used in the study included interviews, a virtual focus group, participant observation, document analysis, a demographic questionnaire, participant diagramming, a metaphor request, and the use of graphic elicitation diagrams. A thematic analysis of the case study evidence using networks for coding, displaying, and interpreting the data was employed with the addition of a cross case analysis of a

number of embedded units. The trustworthiness of the interpretations and meanings attributed to study findings were strengthened by using a multi-modal approach that featured triangulation of data, investigator, theory and methodology.

Chapter 4: Results

There were two main data sources explored in this study, ten individual participant interviews and a virtual focus group discussion. Additional data sources included the use of a demographic questionnaire, participant observation, and document analysis. Instruments used to collect these findings included the semi-structured interview guide, the asynchronous discussion forum and focus group guide, a participant diagramming exercise, the request of a metaphor, and the use of a graphic elicitation diagram. Using a thematic analysis process the single case and its embedded subunits were examined by looking first within the individual participant units and the focus group unit, then between all of the subunits of the case to explore relationships, and finally across the entire case to appraise global connections. A description of the single case and its embedded units was also compiled based on the demographic information gathered. A sample analysis of one participant appears in Appendix M outlining basic and organizing themes. As well, the participant diagrams have been included (Appendix N) and a compilation of the respondent's metaphors (Appendix O).

The chapter will have three sections a) the within case narratives, b) the between case narratives, and c) the across case narratives that summarize findings from the thematic analysis. In section one (the **within case**) there are two subsections the first featuring the individual participant narratives and emergent themes while the second subsection covers the virtual focus group and related themes. Within section two (the **between case**) three perspectives are used to examine the relationship between the different subunits each of which are covered in their own subsection. The first subsection examines the themes between the three experience levels (i.e., student, novice, and experienced counsellors). The second subsection looks at the different practice settings of the participants for prominent themes. And the final subsection reports on themes related to the role of specialized practice and training. The third and final section (the **across case**) features the global themes offered by the research participants in relation to the research questions and issues. In addition to this there is a commentary on the summary findings captured in the graphic elicitation diagram. An overview of the themes emerging from the within case, between case, and across case analysis is provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Overview of the Within Case, Between Case, and Across Case Themes

Within Case Themes

Individual Interviews

Identity challenges and ensuing tensions

- Coping with transition
- Identity compatibility and discord
- Challenges of regulation

Facilitators of identity construction

- Validation from others
- Mentorship
- Precipitating event

Meaningfulness and sense making at heart of identity work

- Values are congruent
- Good fit with counsellor path
- Actualizing life purpose
- Desire to help others

Counsellors embracing their identity building

- Identity construction as a lifelong process
- Agency/ownership of identity shaping
- Embodiment of counsellor identity

Transmitting core elements and dimensionality of counsellor identity

- Pondering defining elements
- Underscore a distinct identity
- Function of work setting/roles
- Multi-layered construct

Virtual Focus Group

Purposefully journeying toward a counsellor identity

- Finding meaning and life purpose through helping others
- Sense of belonging with counsellors and the profession

Needing to negotiate counsellor identity

- Facing uncertainty and tensions
- Reconciling and responding to transition demands
- Cognizant of influencing elements

Continuing to modify and refine counsellor identity

- Sculpting the identity – agency, ownership, and craftsmanship
- Establishing identity a lifelong project
- Building skills and accessing resources

Sensing an inherent connection with counsellor identity and nurturing self-definition

- Innate sense or early identification with being a counsellor
- Reflection and self-questioning
- Congruence between personal and professional self images

Portraying self as a professional counsellor

- Highlighting distinctiveness
- Being counsellor like – conduct, demeanour, and viewpoint

Between Case Themes

Experience levels

- Strengthening identity

Practice settings

- Characterization of counsellor identity

Counselling specialization

- Extra level of advocacy
- Prioritizing an identity

Across Case Themes

Sense of agency

Organic, emergent growth

Guided by values

Safeguard identity integrity

Adaptive shifting

Note. The higher order themes appear first and their subthemes are bulleted directly below each one. Only the higher order or global themes are listed for the Across Case themes.

Within Case Narratives

Individual Participants

There were ten counsellors who completed individual interviews and this subsection will introduce each by way of a brief personal description, a snapshot of their workplace, and the roles associated with their counselling work in these settings. A fictitious name has been assigned to each of the actual participants and certain information has been removed to safeguard their anonymity. The interview participants included one student counsellor, four novice counsellors (i.e., <5 years experience), and five experienced counsellors (i.e., >5 years).

There was a single student counsellor among the interview participants. Theresa is 25 years of age and a counselling internship student completing her placement at a university in their mental health service centre. She provides individual counselling to students and at times may be called upon by professional colleagues to assist with workshops.

Four of the interview participants, Martha, Grace, Vivian, and Naomi were novice counsellors. Martha is 32 years of age and a novice counsellor who works in a university environment providing counselling services. As a member of student services at the university she also provides psychoeducational workshops. Grace is 34 years of age and practices as an art therapist in a community mental health center that serves a specific population. As a novice with almost five years experience as an art therapist she works with a variety of clients ranging from young children to older adults and their families. Vivian is 34 years of age and a novice counsellor who works in the counselling services of a university. She is also pursuing doctoral studies specifically focusing on her specialization in career counselling. Naomi is 33 years of age and is both a crisis counsellor and clinical psychotherapist. As a novice therapist she provides client support in a university counselling centre and on a crisis line associated with government mental health services for the public.

There were five experienced counsellors, Fulton, Renata, Irene, Ella, and Mycroft who completed individual interviews. Fulton is 34 years of age and an experienced counsellor. He works with students facing physical or emotional challenges that may need accommodation and supportive services through the university counselling centre. In addition to this role, he frequently acts as an internship supervisor for counsellors-in-training. Renata is 66 years of age and an experienced counsellor who remains actively involved with her professional association.

In her private practice she provides counselling support focusing primarily on marriage and couples therapy. Irene is also 66 years of age and identifies herself as a psychotherapist and marriage and family therapist. As an experienced therapist she provides counselling support to a rural population through her private practice. Ella is 33 years of age and an experienced career counsellor. She provides counselling through the student services department of a community college to students dealing with personal and career issues. Mycroft is 59 years of age and an experienced counselling psychologist. He maintains a small private practice but primarily works as a counsellor educator in a university setting.

Emerging themes. The thematic analysis of the interviews garnered between six and ten organizing themes for each interview participant generating over 70 organizing themes. Further analysis and reduction allowed these to be grouped under five main themes which were: a) identity challenges and ensuing tensions, b) facilitators of identity construction, c) meaningfulness and sense making at heart of identity work, d) counsellors embracing their identity building, and e) transmitting core elements and dimensionality of counsellor identity. A number of subthemes were associated with each of the organizing themes and these will be outlined in each of the sections to follow.

Identity challenges and ensuing tensions. The themes in this particular grouping were situated within the context of identity in transition and highlighted moments of change with both positive and negative valence. Participants spoke to the tensions, challenges, and transformative episodes of their identity work both past and present with particular emphasis on the current credentialing and professional regulation changes taking place in their province. This theme had three subthemes: coping with transition, identity compatibility and discord, and the challenges of regulation.

Coping with transition. Counsellor identity was viewed as an evolving, negotiated entity with inevitable periods of both transformative and unsettling transition. Speaking from the perspective of a counselling intern, Theresa viewed her identity transition away from being a full-time student as “exhausting definitely, like really exhausting. Like sometimes I feel like I am going to burn out and I just started out so how do people do this for twenty years? Yeah, but the transition was very exciting at first, very, very exciting especially those first few days of orientation.” Impending regulatory changes were about to add another layer of worry with all of the unknowns surfacing at an inopportune time and as she stated:

Thinking that far ahead makes me feel a bit anxious just because I want to take it a day at a time and see where I go and like thinking about what if when I am done the research thing and I want to go and start practicing and I am missing some qualifications or hours and I have to go back and redo that sounds discouraging.

She put forward a metaphor of a ceramic vase, a container that was “sort of fragile like material that can break at any time but can also be glued back together at any point” to emphasize the challenges and the possibilities associated with authenticating her identity as a counsellor.

Identity compatibility and discord. Some participants reported their identity transitions and ensuing tensions arose from dissonance, confusion, task variability, and shifting role expectations. Naomi searched for a reasonable balance between “two identities that could be morphed together” namely clinical psychology and her counsellor identity in spite of her strong feelings that in “clinical psychology I find the diagnosis is up front and centre which is something that is not congruent with how I view the individual and how I approach or my counselling philosophy.” Transitioning also involved integrating another counsellor identity as in Fulton’s situation where taking on the tasks of being a supervisor now need to be worked out and there was a tinge of trepidation when he declared, “I am feeling I do not have enough knowledge, enough experience or skill that’s when you know the limits of that capacity will have to expand . . . like when you reach a threshold you know you have to extend it.” To him it was more than task or skill acquisition, as he clearly stated “the first word that comes to mind is comfort level but that does not say much. But ultimately that is what it is about; you reach a point where you feel comfortable in that, with that identity.” Fulton offered a visual metaphor of three dimensional planes of existence to explain the layers of identity that unfolded as he worked through this identity transition. He stated, “I am still that one that is counsellor but there is 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, ambivalence, and enthusiasm for the unfolding professional regulation going on around them. Some felt challenges and tensions imposed on counsellor identity by such a regulatory environment may prompt them to alter their career path as was the case for Ella who stated:

It may affect my career plans and it may not. If I do decide to try to work my way into government at this point then I definitely won’t need to register. But if I decide to open my own practice and stay strictly away from psychotherapy and make sure that I am not practicing any of the soon to be controlled acts, I could do that too.

Still others like Vivian have “taken a big step back from even caring about what is going on with the Transitional Council or the College. I figure they will figure it out eventually.” Tensions others faced in negotiating their counsellor identity during this transition were absent for her and she summarized her stance saying, “I have decided that it is not really representing who I am as a counsellor right now.” Grace on the other hand worried the introduction of regulation might remove flexibility and expressed her concerns:

When I talk about using art therapist or counsellor or other titles I might use, trainer or whatever I’m the one who gets to choose when to use that, when it’s convenient for me. I doesn’t change the way I think about myself, it’s just convenient to talk about that with different people whereas I think when the province seeks out regulation it’s an external force that says you now have to identify your practice or what you are doing under this title and I think that could be confining.

She highlighted how counsellors like her may need to “bend themselves more but that is the bending to get that title . . . yeah, putting yourself into a different category or box.” There would be logistics or title adaptation but not how she self-identifies. As she explained:

I would have to have all these qualifiers right, like art psychotherapist or psychotherapy through art I guess um. Like I said, I think it wouldn’t change me or change how I use the word art therapist in the professional field, like writing or publishing or associations. I don’t think it would change how I identify myself that way.

Against the backdrop of the pending regulatory college and the unknown implications for counsellors Irene and Renata expressed how they were reconciling some of the surfacing tensions. Irene in thinking of herself and fellow counsellors pondered whether “some part of their identity become less important or put to the side” in order to fall under a particular designation and “when people say to you well what is your professional identity or what is your profession you know, I should be able to hand over a business card that says this is what I do.” Professional identity according to her was a settling out of what she was comfortable calling herself and what was designated by the professional college through regulation. Renata considered the current regulation climate less relevant stating, “At this stage in my life and with all this stuff coming out of the college it’s more like that’s on the sidelines and I don’t know what that means or how that is going to help me and it’s not really a strong focus for me.” What was of concern to her was reconciling the loss of the counsellor title under the proposed regulations and her deep identification that was not merely instrumental as she explained, “I just

wish I knew what happened to the official term, and that is just semantics I guess but for me I am fighting it because I did read some other province their designation is counselling therapist and that just really, really fits for me in my sense of my identity.” She concluded with the following statement, “the word counsellor has disappeared from the horizon completely . . . I don’t like the idea that it’s been lost.”

Naomi and Mycroft offered a number of comments to demonstrate how variable the tensions were relative to the upcoming regulatory changes and how it was viewed as both a boon and a bane for these counsellors constructing their identity. For example, Naomi enthusiastically endorsed it saying “that initiative of regulating the practice of psychotherapy and counselling I think it is a very good thing and for me it will allow to solidify I think my identity, my professional identity even more and to be proud to say yeah I am a psychotherapist.” Regulation was a way to reduce tensions that arose from an unsettled counsellor identity by introducing the potential use of an additional one that was perhaps better recognized. In her words:

It is very frustrating because the profession, at least not in Ontario, is not well defined, not recognized, that it is almost this internal battle all the time that is going on – who am I? Do I really want to identify with this identity of counsellor because they are not really recognized but we do great work?

From her perspective, counsellor identity could be added to or layered when tensions arose if there was compatibility, and this was emphasized later during her participant diagramming task.

Mycroft on the other hand described the tensions of identity negotiation as a kind of push-back by counsellors that could strengthen and affirm professional identity as negative elements become a consolidating force in turn making them “feel more passionate about hanging onto it and making sure it doesn’t get erased.” In his words, “you don’t experience your identity much unless you are bumping into something. It is when something is impinging on you or stopping you from getting where you want to go or ignoring you.” Mycroft talked about counsellors having an “active response against oppression or marginalization in relation to this aspect of their identity which they are trying to keep alive” while another respondent, Martha spoke about making some small act of resistance. Faced with the difficulties of reconciling the discrepancies between her counsellor identity and the proposed regulatory title of psychotherapist she stated, “I feel like I would play the role of the psychotherapist but not become the psychotherapist . . . I don’t know if I would become the psychotherapist, I don’t know but I certainly would adopt the title.” Not only was there a strategy for negotiating the

tensions, Martha outlined her rationale as well when she stated, “there is a part of me that it doesn’t matter, they can call me anything, it’s not going to change what I do and that is where I find satisfaction and meaning.” Unlike Naomi, this respondent expressed a reluctance to bring the psychotherapist identity alongside of her counsellor identity as she viewed them as noticeably distinct.

Facilitators of identity construction. The themes in this particular grouping point to a few of the resources, opportunities, influencing factors and precipitating events many of the participants drew upon during their identity work. These are tangible and instrumental mechanisms that facilitated the construction of counsellor professional identity. Some of these were a product of their own efforts while others stemmed from an external source. This theme, facilitators of identity construction, had three subthemes: validation, mentorship and a precipitating event.

Validation. For Theresa, one of the factors contributing to her identity construction was receiving confirmation from her professional peers about her growing sense of becoming a counsellor. She offered this example:

I often receive is like oh, you are really good at this it’s like, no wonder you chose this profession. It really fits well with you and who you are as a person and that solidified the way I see myself as a counsellor because I feel like well this is what I am meant to be doing and it translates into different aspects of my life and its present throughout most of my interactions.

Recognition of competency and validation of fit with the profession from external sources strengthened her internal view of herself as a counsellor. Renata also acknowledged that having members of her practice community corroborate her own sense of identity as a counsellor fortified the work she was doing building her professional identity. She explained it this way, “there is a pull between my realizing that you can’t develop a professional identity in a vacuum or by just using yourself as the focus of what you are doing and how you are doing it but you also have to use the community whether it be your peers, supervisors or mentors, clients.” In some instances this community can have a negative as well as a positive impact on identity construction for counsellors. Naomi recounted a negative experience within her training that shook the foundations of her identity describing it as “a very rough road because it was almost like starting my construction of my identity from scratch.” This turned around when validation from elsewhere helped her regain confidence to shape her identity again as a counsellor and

psychotherapist saying “it was because those two people, my supervisor and my thesis advisor that I felt ok I am comfortable in this role. I am comfortable in this identity and it became a very positive experience for me.”

Mentorship. Mentors were instrumental resources for many of the participants as they navigated their counsellor identity. This was very much the case during Fulton’s identity work as he recalled, “it was my internship supervisor... she definitely was one person that helped shape that identity” but transferring counselling knowledge into practice was also a supportive resource, “so as I was working and trying to do this work well, I would reflect back on the studies, the courses, the material, the literature in that sense that helped shaped the identity.” Vivian felt very strongly about the role mentors had in her construction process which was apparent from her statement:

I believe in the power of mentors, I think that they, I don’t know how I would get to where I was today without them. So I often, 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 sort of figure out where the lines are I guess and what’s possible.

A precipitating event. In some instances the precipitating event was a happenstance meeting with a person practicing in the counselling field or a particular piece of written work ignited or fostered the participants developing identity. Mycroft recounted how during some of the early searching when “every new model went wow there’s a lot of good ideas in there. How could I ever have any coherent identity you know, like every single theory seems to make total sense . . . well not total, but a ton of sense.” As he recalled, “Then a prof said, I don’t know but somehow she knew I was into stories, you know, writing stories . . . you might be interested in this book because it’s about therapy but it’s sort of from a story kind of angle.” He drew attention to the depth of meaning it had as follows:

It’s not like it was just the book, it’s just the book happened to be opening the door to a territory that resonated for me . . . as soon as I read it, it was like um, absolutely life changing because it was ok, I’m totally on this page and it doesn’t mean that all the other ones disappear, but it was like I found an ethical and aesthetic home.

Vivian spoke about a somewhat similar experience early on in her identity building. This was how her experience unfolded and what the precipitating event meant to her:

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, Do

What You Are . . . and like oh my god, where has this been all my life. 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.

Mycroft offered a summary comment that perhaps captured Vivian's sentiment on the power of chance events as well when he stated, "I think the happenstance events that get taken up are the ones that get taken up because they fit with fundamental values."

For other participants the precipitant was a combination of personal experiences and a series of life events. Irene reflected on a few she had experienced and how some were "recurring themes." She offered the following disclosure:

I think that childhood events have shaped my professional identity . . . financial pressures and financial changes and the family changes and system changes are all part of what changes my career route. So for my professional identity as you talk about what changed it, I think the normal human development and being a social person changes it.

Many of these life events were tinged with adversity and challenges but as Ella explained "even though I was poor as a church mouse. I was working twenty hours a week in addition to being a student and it was tough, it was an awful lot" but to her and Irene this was central to the process. Even the potential of an unforeseen event was cause for Irene to remark, "If there was any problem in the cells of my body, like cancer, it would change my professional identity in a flash."

Meaningfulness and sense making at heart of identity work. The themes that stood out in this grouping coalesce around purpose seeking, values congruence, a call to help others, and finding a genuine goodness of fit with the counsellor identity. More than instrumental or functional elements of identity building as discussed in the previous grouping, what surfaced here were participant's understandings about deeper, internalized, and reflexive qualities that were grounded in their creation and interpretation process. Not only did participants talk about retrospective instances of bringing sense to how they saw themselves and how others defined them as counsellors but a few in-the-moment insights also came to pass. This theme, meaningfulness and sense making at the heart of identity work had four subthemes: values are congruent, good fit with counsellor path, actualizing life purpose, and a 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 interview participants. This was often portrayed as a relational, ebb and flow

between personal and professional self-images that occurred at times during their identity shaping process. For instance, Martha pointed out how “some of those characteristics and values you might hold in your everyday personal life as well. I think it is what resonates with you in terms of constructing that identity so I think I sort of have some values and feelings about my professional identity – I don’t think it is completely different from who I am at home.” Martha also demonstrated this balancing of the personal and professional through the intentional orchestration of her workspace. Using ambient lighting, neutral furnishings, inspirational posters, framed displays of her professional credentials, and thoughtfully selected personal items Martha created what she felt was a warm, welcoming counselling space that stayed true to personal and professional values.

Theresa offered her reflections on the relationship between her personal identity and how she sees herself as a counsellor, her professional identity: “The skills that I use professionally I use them personally and like that has definitely formed my identity as a counsellor the fact that um it is who I am as a person also.” Similar to Martha, the staging of the counselling office as explained by Theresa was sensitively done to message important values of both a personal and professional nature. Although this was a temporary workplace, she spoke about moderately personalizing it with special lighting and artifacts (pictures, figurines, books) to counter the “emptiness” of the institutional furnishings. Theresa explained how she intentionally worked to obtain a balance between communicating degrees of her personal and professional identity as she saw them to be equally important elements for establishing client rapport, confidence, and comfort. In her opinion, most counsellors are keenly aware of ensuring their workspace is welcoming and relaxed while understanding this is also a part of how they establish their unique identity as a counsellor.

This weaving back and forth between the personal and professional identities was not only spoken about but represented in a number of the diagrams done by participants. Renata depicted the connectedness of her personal and professional worldviews using circles that contained words to describe each and as she explained there was “definitely progression but there would definitely be movement within them.” Naomi chose a concept map to bring to life the relatedness of her personal and professional values, beliefs, and ways of being. Her personal self occupied the center core and radiating from this were various social and professional dimensions. A mobius band was the visual metaphor used by Irene to explain “what is coming

from the inside and what's outside" and the looping back and forth, "the reciprocal movement thing that is going on for me, it has always been like that sense of in and out." Grace diagrammed this relationship of how her "professional and personal life were blending in this intersecting kind of way" using a Venn image. She explained this further saying it was:

. . . part of your professional identity, part of your personal identity . . . there is definitely an overlap and there are definitely things that I value like humility and authenticity I guess that come into my professional identity and then there is this professional boundary that says, you don't need to know the personal details about who I am, to know who I am.

Personal and professional values were not only something correlated and integrated but for some there was an even deeper compulsion to ensure both were ethically and philosophically reconciled. Aesthetic coherence by virtue of affirming personal and professional values was a prerequisite dimension of Mycroft's professional identity work. As he stated:

It is important to me that my values resonate with what I am doing . . . So it is more like in hindsight you can identify the values. In other words, another way to put it I guess is we live our values. I mean every time we open our mouth, every time we take a step forward it is always an expression of what is important to us at least at this time, so by analyzing what steps did we take, what book did we read, which workshop did we go to, what did we say to our client and how did we say it, then we can discover which values we are privileging I think.

For Mycroft "it has more to do with identify[ing] with what your pretty fundamental values, beliefs are, your way of being, your preferred way of being, the way you see the world, the way you are in the world or the way you aspire to be in the world that might be a more telling point because that's always aspirational." Mycroft envisioned how counsellors like himself brought this to fruition when he offered that "It is something about fitting the theories and practices with your values and your ways of being so that there is more of a 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." He ended with these thoughtful words

I followed my values I think you know in the sense that I continued to get professional development and continue toward the stuff that felt resonant or a good fit or that you know was, touched me in some way, that felt important, that felt almost transcendent you know, that felt like doing something very significant and honouring and that kind of thing.

Good fit with counsellor path. Another aspect of this search for meaning and resonance within the dimensions of the identity work was a pursuit for some measure of "goodness of fit"

or a feeling at least of being on “the right path” as expressed by Martha, Mycroft and Naomi. In a combination of retrospective thoughts and current musings, Martha offered a number of images and metaphors to represent her growing realization of being well-matched with her counsellor identity. Unclear at first, she sensed “some sort of purpose, maybe I was going to find my little niche, my place, whatever that meant” and “then when I started the program it literally was like everything fell into place. It was like everything, like puzzle pieces all in a mess and then just I couldn’t see the picture – there is imagery there.” She then went on to say:

I think throughout this conversation I realized that my professional identity I’ve seen a lot of it as a journey, as a trajectory. To me there are lots of twists and turns and there are people who have impacted me and who I have allowed to impact me and make suggestions along the way. Some of those might be people who have said, hey you might be good at this or maybe you should try this or even clients that I have realized I guess that it’s a resonance that I am doing the right thing, like I am on the right path.

Mycroft had some vague feeling the path to becoming a counsellor was present saying, “It was like all those years part of my curiosity never really went away but it was parked on the side while I was pursuing a different career.” It was eventually through his association with other mental health professionals and “partly observing what they did” this feeling grew. He made clear that “it wasn’t about someone saying, hey you’d be really good at this . . . It wasn’t about the idea that I am a born therapist type . . . I don’t think of myself in that sense.” He felt his identification with the counselling profession started with “being very interested in it, feeling like I could articulate like at the academic level, I could articulate lots of useful things about it.” Once the path was entered upon there was often a feeling of being at home, in the right place as it were. Using a very tangible image Naomi 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, yeah I think that’s what the expression is, where you just feel you are where you should be, that’s what I feel right now in terms of my own professional identity.

She then concluded by saying, “I don’t think you necessarily choose the profession, it chooses you.”

Actualizing life purpose. Speaking more extensively on how meaning and purpose seeking 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. Theresa introduced her experience saying, “I always kind of felt that it was a part of me. Since a very young age I would say I did not struggle to find what my career should be or what am I destined

to do.” Guided by this belief, her identification was then strengthened as she stated, “I got some good feedback from our trainers and I just felt they encouraged me along and I just felt ok, this is my calling; I feel like[I] identify with this kind of profession, so I just kept going and so far so good.” Naomi felt meaning making was critical to the creation and negotiation of her professional identity saying, “Vocation or calling is more central than any term or title would ever be.” She offered this poignant explanation:

There is this scripture and I know it in French, I am going to try and translate it, in English it is, many are called but few are chosen. And basically it is a parable about harvesting, harvesting wheat, harvesting that you will reap what you sow and 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. So that kind of scripture comes to mind, many are called but few are chosen, and I find that being a counselling psychologist or being a clinical psychotherapist, a crisis counsellor or counsellor – I think it is a calling.

Grace echoed these same sentiments of being called to the counsellor role when she stated, “it definitely doesn’t feel like a profession that you know, you go home at the end of the day and you did your job. It’s not a job, it’s like someone had said to me, another, it was a social worker, this is my vocation.” She described it as a blending of identity, vocation, love, and passion. Embracing the counsellor identity has caused moments of deep reflection and Grace shared some of the thoughts that surfaced while navigating these deeper layers of her professional self:

I guess that’s who we are, people and the confessional, and people used to go to 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 spiritual vocation but I don’t think many see people us counsellors in that same kind of realm. There may be some . . . I don’t know, are we walking that realm . . . same kind of skills, working with families that are grieving, supporting, containing, offering a sacred space?

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 the counselling profession met this need. As Fulton stated, “Being in a helping profession – that is the overall desire” and this was crystallized through his counsellor identity. He talked about growing up in a war torn country and its impact:

. . . so along the way you can imagine I observed many people in great need of help . . . I think that is the first time I started thinking about the helping professions . . . as far as

personal life goes that is what shaped that foundation to wanting to be in a helping profession and really was the ground for me then exploring options and focusing on counselling as one way of doing that.

Professional identity according to Fulton was about having a “counselling perspective on helping people,” it brings together “a mix of one’s vision based on desires and goals” and becomes “one way of realizing those personal values.”

This desire to help others was equally felt by Martha and she recalled “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.” A similar desire to help others came over Theresa as she approached young adulthood, “I think that right out of high school I jumped into psychology because I loved the subject matter and I always pictured myself just helping people in one way or another.” In Irene’s case an altruistic intention has sustained the evolution of her counsellor identity despite times of financial and personal challenge. Looking back she stated, “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.” Sometimes it is one of those life changing decisions like Naomi made during her academic pursuits. She described this growing realization in the following words:

I didn’t feel like I was actually, concretely helping . . . it felt like there was something missing and I was able to pinpoint with, I want to help people . . . That’s when I did the whole 360 and that’s not what I want, I want to be in a helping profession. I want to be in a concrete helping profession . . . It is something that just calls to me.

Having made the decision to pursue counselling and a role in the helping professions things changed as she explained, “I was very happy and I was finally saying yeah, this is what I have to do with my life, this is what I want to do with my life.” Identifying as a counsellor was her way of naming this desire to help others.

Counsellors embracing their identity building. The central theme of this grouping focused on counsellors embracing their identity work as a lifelong project which involved taking ownership and being active agents in becoming a professional. Participants shared some of the ways they were undertaking the building and shaping of their counsellor identity often expressing it in terms of being an emergent, fluid process. Identity construction was life-long work they deployed along on a unique trajectory from ideation to embodiment. Not only did they see themselves as the authors of their identity narrative but they considered themselves the primary, preeminent actor. This theme, counsellors embracing their identity building had three

subthemes: identity construction as a lifelong process, agency/ownership of identity shaping, and the embodiment of counsellor identity.

Identity construction as lifelong process. Theresa viewed her counsellor identity as a work in progress with many fluctuations and the potential for some unexpected twists and turns. This was how she described the process:

I think that professional identity is like an ongoing construction of one's self and it can change, it is not linear, it could be all over the place. You could start here and end up here. I guess that is the way I see it. I think ideally everybody wants to start at the bottom and grow until they reach the top and get better, better and better but I think it is up and down and it is like a roller coaster ride.

She depicted this uneven and emergent feeling as a wavy line, "this squiggly thing represents the ups and downs" drawn over the heads of three figures the first done with dotted lines, the second slightly taller drawn with solid lines, and the third much taller with dark emphatic lines and the broadest smile of all three. Theresa made it clear this was not a progression but rather a visual of the fluidity, the constant back and forth inevitable during her the burgeoning of her counsellor identity. She had this to say about its' tentativeness:

Even when you think you have solidified something could come along the way and completely break that and then you have to start from scratch and rebuild. So I don't think you could ever . . . I don't think it is something that you get to and that you own and it's yours. I think that it's really fragile and it could break at any time.

Bringing this back to another image [offered in response to the metaphor request] she likened it to the fragility of a ceramic vase saying, "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."

There was a general sense that the identity portrait was something perpetually being crafted and mastery was not only elusive but illusory. Vivian saw her counsellor identity as something both emergent and subject to the tides of time:

I think it is always evolving because I think priorities change over time. So what is important to me now is not necessarily going to be important to me twenty years from now when I am 54 and twenty years from that when I am 74. Those things will change.

Ella was enthusiastic about the idea of her counsellor identity always open for 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. I think there is always something new I can learn, there is always an additional skill I can develop." For her and some others as well, the

addition of skills brought new layers to their existing identity and was often cited as an important tool they used throughout the construction process. On this idea of constant refinement and identity enrichment, Naomi made a similar comment to Ella when she said, “I do think that the identity is in constant evolution” and “I always saw myself as a work in progress and I hope that I am never finished.” This shifting and transformative identity was both envisioned and given a personalized image by Naomi:

I like the chameleon identity kind of thing . . . I don't know maybe that is just my personal expression but, because I don't think that an identity is, how would I say, I don't think that it is set in stone and that once it is set in stone that it will become immobile. I think that an identity has to be very fluid and will evolve with time and so it is important to be able to have that flexibility and want to have that evolution operate because I think that is how we become, that is how we shape ourselves.

The idea of growing and reworking the counsellor identity was viewed differently by Fulton who saw it more as the addition of layers. “So I think it is just, I think we grow on more layers rather than change . . . so growing more layers as opposed to changing shape – something like that.” He related this to his experience as an internship supervisor, “I definitely think it is continuous; it shapes every turn in my case when I get a different set of interns and I work with them in those hours of supervision that continues to shape my identity as a counsellor.” Grace also felt she was “always adapting, growing, solidifying” and welcomed this transformative evolution of her professional self: “I don't think I want it to end . . . its like there is always more room to grow.” Part of this unfolding was discovering for herself that “there is a core, enduring qualities about me that brought me to my field but I'm not walking in that hat or those responsibilities all the time.” Stating that she identified with “that kind of learning journey that you learn the basics and then you just keep growing but you're building but you are repeating and going over things constantly and refining” she offered the image of a spiral as a rich metaphor. It was not necessarily “a rigid coiled spring where you are just repeating in circles, but kind of the organic, like DNA it changes the way mutations can happen and you know, the way it can combine with other spirals. It criss-crosses you know and get influenced and change and shift.” The nebulous, fluid, and circling properties of Naomi's spiral were mirrored by Irene who believed her identity was “amorphous” and fluid like a mobius strip. She described the emergent development of her identity as “a little atom type thing where I am constantly moving”

and then “every time I feel there is a gap, I do more. It’s like I am a walking um . . . what is it . . . a sponge.”

Agency/ownership of identity shaping. Another way participants went about embracing their identity project was by being the agent of this shaping process. Ella was particularly emphatic that the design and choices were her own to make and as she stated:

I feel very much like I am in control of my professional identity but that is only because . . . that’s not only because, but, and I choose to take ownership of that identity. And in counselling we do, I like to think, choose the identity. We don’t necessarily realize we are making all those choices at the same time but we choose counselling anyways, so we have already chosen an impression of an identity in any case.

Autonomy was a key principle guiding her identity work, “So I am very much a believer that my identity has a big chunk of where it comes from is my own” and she also hoped her counselling colleagues had the same freedom, “I like to think counsellors don’t have their entire identities pushed on them by their clients or their workplace.”

Renata shared this sense of agency and emphasized the importance of taking ownership for the navigation of her counsellor identity. These were her thoughts, “Well it is definitely my life project and it is part of who I am that I like to make my own choices.” This was accomplished by “continually reading and forming myself to the point where I never seem to pick up a book that isn’t related to my field.” Being autonomous about the formation of her counsellor identity was a given for Grace who said, “I think I have always been proactive about my professional creation and identity formation and accreditation simply because I see the larger picture of my field and wanting to pursue that”. The way she saw it was “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.” Assuming authorship of and being the main actor in her identity story was even more demanding for Vivian who faced personal and financial challenges while pursuing her counsellor training. She described what it was like entering her graduate studies with a strong identification with career counselling and receiving little support for that identity:

I could have just as easily given that up and become what they were becoming; you know what I mean rather than be that outsider. I could have just said, yeah forget career counselling, let’s just all do trauma yeah. But I decided to hold onto it so I really feel like I am the constructor of my own identity.

Embodiment of counsellor identity. There were a few participants who felt a deep identification and described this profound internalization of their counsellor identity as being

embedded, ingrained, or embodied. Theresa outlined the way into the heart of her counsellor identity when she stated:

I think like you really think a lot about it at first and then you just feel it. You know, it is like you internalize it. It is integrated as a part of who you are and it is just something that you feel and embody. Whereas at first when you are not too sure how to feel and how to embody you are just thinking about it all the time so it is all in your head and maybe eventually it's in your heart.

It was a similar feeling for Naomi who said, "I think I see it more like embedded within me" and "it is part of who I am." Her counsellor identity was not just something she could take off and put on as she explained:

I don't see myself as an actor that is performing a role because if I were to say I play the role of a psychotherapist then there would be that kind of authenticity missing, you understand . . . But and I want to make this very clear, it is not just a role, it's an identity. And that is much more deeper than just a role.

Fulton articulated how strongly ingrained he felt his counsellor identity was and with his gradual move away from this identity due to other academic pursuits this would not come easily. Thinking ahead he envisioned "there may be something in the core that I will, for example a situation will probably trigger something, that might kick start, it might kick start that core sense of I used to be a counsellor, I know what this means, I know what to do." He followed this with some further clarification saying, "and not just at the cognitive level, it would be just like riding a bike. I would react and respond as a counsellor . . . yeah." He then concluded with this thought:

So I think yeah at the core level perhaps there is something that would remain and mainly because it is probably a way I have realized that sense of wanting to be in a helping profession in my mind so that has become integrated as part of my identity, my self-concept. So it is probably situated somewhere in my core self-concept, at one part I am a counsellor and that may remain there forever . . . and it may be the reason why I feel 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 themes in this last grouping put a spotlight on how participants described, delineated, and conveyed fundamental aspects of their professional identity. A number of counsellors focused on connotations and (mis)representations while others emphasized the defining elements that set them apart from other allied professions. Challenges of clarifying and differentiating counsellor

identity while inhabiting certain environments (i.e., specialized practice, professional communities, or workplace settings) were underscored by participants as significant for the success or breakdown of their identity building. The verbatim quotes which follow provide a glimpse of the crafting process employed in weaving, sculpting, or reconstituting the multiple layers of their counsellor identity. This discussion was particularly influenced by the pending regulatory changes as definitional parameters, designations, roles, titles, and ways of practicing were either newly demarcated or still under review for counselling professionals. This theme, transmitting core elements and dimensionality of counsellor identity had four subthemes: pondering defining elements, underscore a distinct identity, the function of work setting/roles, and a multi-layered construct.

Pondering defining elements. There were mixed feelings about the importance of securing the designation of counsellor and seeing it as critical for maintaining some internal sense of this identity. Renata was struggling to make sense of a growing realization that designating herself as a counsellor under current and unfolding events had some challenges. As she exclaimed, “I don’t know what really happened to all that because we lost our counselling designation completely with all this...the word counsellor has disappeared from the horizon completely . . . I don’t like the idea that it’s been lost.” She continued to process some of her concerns and preferences during the interview explaining how “there is one province that uses counselling therapist and I really like that designation.” Still somewhat perplexed by the circumstances and what that meant for her identity as a counsellor she stated:

I just wish I knew what happened to the official term, and that is just semantics I guess but for me I am fighting it because I did read some other province their designation is counselling therapist and that just really, really fits for me in my sense of my identity.

Her plans for dealing with this loss of the designation that resonated and working within the limits posed by the regulations went as follows, “If I am going to be part of a college I will definitely use any designation but that’s not to mean I won’t also call myself a counsellor or continue to call myself a counselling therapist on my website with an official designation as a registered therapist.” As much as Renata was looking to negotiate her counsellor identity with externally imposed designations, Fulton remained rather indifferent to these concerns. As he said, “It does not mean anything to be called a professional, to be seen as a professional counsellor. It is more of a way of existing as a working professional, a way of looking at

presenting problems rather than a designation.” He went on to explain his reason for taking such a neutral stance, “I don’t feel a sense of having to fight for that identity and maybe that is in part because of what we talked about last time that a part of me will always feel like a counsellor.” Adding another layer of support for his claim he cited his current workplace context as evidence, “Especially in my case because the designation does not reflect counselling at all so maybe that is why I feel this way.”

Being able to transmit core elements and dimensions of their counsellor identity were compounded at times by confusing titles or misinterpretations. Martha stated, “Sometimes it needs a qualifier sometimes it doesn’t, 90% of the time people understand what counsellor means but if there is a question I would say a mental health counsellor.” Finding a way to clarify who they were as counsellors seemed to fall on the participants and some came up with workable solutions amid the ongoing changes. This was how Renata had negotiated the different dimensions, “I guess the psychotherapist title is really a good title to put you clearly in the area of your field and then the other [counsellor] would be more at a personal level where I would convey more to do with me and my style and my very individual professional identity.” Aligning his identity with his training background and workplace setting, Fulton looked to a very specific title, “I describe myself as an educational counsellor, a real educational counsellor a true educational counsellor.” It seemed important to indicate educational or specialized training to clarify his counsellor title but credentialing qualifiers were less important, “I don’t need a qualifier like certified counsellor or professional counsellor. It almost sounds like . . . unnecessary.” Martha offered some further thoughts on the importance of titles such as those proposed by the upcoming regulatory college and what this might mean for her sense of identity as a counsellor:

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. The title helps, it’s labelled and I think there is a sense of being a member of like you know, I don’t want to say an elite, an educated group and proud to be a part of that group. Feeling proud about what I do but to me the day to day stuff, 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.

Her comments reflected a similar sentiment to those who viewed their internal sense of being a counsellor as more of the constant than external designators or titles which often were quite variable.

Underscore a distinct identity. Needing to distinguish precisely what characterizes counsellors was another challenge participants faced as they constructed and communicated their professional identity. Sorting out the areas of difference and overlap between counsellor and psychotherapist was a major point of discussion. Mycroft saw little differentiation saying, “I think counselling is the same skill, trade, art, science as psychotherapy. I just think of them as different words with different connotations . . . think of a counsellor as someone who is not doing psychotherapy or as a psychotherapist who is not doing counselling; I think they are both doing it.” Renata on the other hand remained quite uncertain and attributed some of this to keeping abreast with regulatory changes, “I don’t know that I am up to date on what the thinking is nowadays but it seems that it is kind of grey in terms of distinguishing between the counsellor versus psychotherapist.” She talked about “hearing stuff and not really knowing you know the basis for the fear mongering . . . the definitions of a counsellor which I don’t even know what happened to it” and commenting further on how it was “a very limiting type definition which I responded to in a negative way.”

For a number of participants the features that set the counsellor identity apart were grounded in the ethics, philosophy, and therapeutic practices of their profession. When asked, Irene believed that being a counsellor and a professional meant, “You are aware of your code of ethics, you are aware of how to stay professional.” For her it was about building up a reputation in her community and with clients founded on ethical practice which lead to, “I am going to trust you with what I’ve got” and in her estimation, “That’s professional identity, that’s a really strong professional identity.” Renata felt what made her unique as a counsellor was the philosophical premises rooted in her profession which she explained in this way, “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.” For Martha and Vivian it was a combination of counselling philosophy and client interaction that shaped their identity as a counsellor especially during the regulatory change when competing identities needed to be reconciled or perhaps divested. Martha stated, “Counsellor to me just sounds more approachable. I think it sounds a little bit less I don’t know, medicalized or something.” She went on to explain why she felt strongly on this point, “I didn’t study psychotherapy I studied counselling and it just seems a friendlier term. Not quite so cold and dry. I don’t know it just seems warmer, I don’t know why

it is evoking temperature feelings.” During her interview she deliberated how she might reconcile some of these discrepancies that were surfacing, “I hadn’t thought about that – would I become a psychotherapist. It’s true, ok I am a psychotherapist but would I truly become a psychotherapist – to me there is a difference there.” Vivian shared some of the same concerns with the title of psychotherapist and where it did or did not fit with her counsellor identity. She had this to say, “I worry that psychotherapist has the connotation of psychopathy, psychiatrist, psychologist and all of those words and while that’s definitely what I can do, I think it might scare away many clients who are looking for career counselling support.” The designation or title that was closest to her identity was not psychotherapist and she explained saying, “I feel like counsellor is a much more approachable word for the public . . . I think it is a softer term and a more welcoming term and it gives the connotation of conversation rather than, there is something wrong with you.” Congruence with ethical, philosophical, and therapeutic rapport was important for counsellors building their professional identity according to these two participants but the designation or title ascribed had the potential to create disharmony.

Function of work setting/roles. Some found their role or job related tasks and the setting where these were enacted influenced their identity construction while others felt differently. The focus for Mycroft was on the doing more than the various titles being used, “I definitely don’t use the word psychotherapist but I don’t use the word counsellor much either. I don’t think I use a word much. I don’t usually use a word to describe what we are doing.” The job was what Fulton said helped him stay connected to the counselling identity and in his case “the job being done is a big factor in building the identity and escaping the identity.” In his current counselling position the job tasks included numerous administrative and supervisory activities making it difficult at times to preserve his counsellor identity. For Grace it was less about the job and more about the relational bond with the community:

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.

She included not only clients but coworkers, the counselling centre, and the social environment just outside of this when she spoke about the community as a factor in the growth of her professional identity. In particular, Grace liked “how people can adapt to who they’re working with and where they’re working in and the communities they’re working in.” Drawing on her

earlier metaphor of a spiral with adaptive cycles, she saw her identity shifting its state relative to her environment, “I can almost see that happening too, that it changes and shifts that way depending on the context as if it popped my spiral somewhere else.” Although the setting was significant for some others like Ella felt differently, “I am looking for something much closer to me, I mean if you are going to talk about identity for me that feels more individual to, just the notion of identity sounds much closer to the person rather than the place that they are in.”

Multi-layered construct. Counsellor identity was considered multi-faceted and participants offered their accounts of how layers were applied to their professional self. The counsellor identity was the foundation of Theresa’s professional self, “It would probably be the founding identity, my foundation of everything that I built more identities on top of it.” She went on to explain what these layers looked like, how they were determined, and how she foresaw this process over time:

I think my identity will keep changing until I get there. Like see right now I still identify with student/intern. Next year I might be researcher/I don’t know . . . counsellor. Maybe I won’t be an intern. I think that keeps changing depending on the context you know, just the experience I am going through. I think that changes. So I’ll keep identifying with different things but I mean, like I said, I think the counsellor identity will always underlie whatever it is that I start to identify with as I change.

Grace talked about this as well saying, “there’s lots of layers” and “so many different aspects and I would say they intertwine and wrap but there is this core movement.” This ability to increase the dimensionality of their identity was something she had noticed about other counsellors as well, “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.” Discovering how this identity augmentation was orchestrated by other experienced counsellors came at a time when Grace was shaping her professional identity, “It was the fact that they had blended all those realms that were really interesting into something that spoke to me I think and that, that existed...that they weren’t an art teacher or a psychologist or a counsellor, they were all those things together.”

Adding another layer to his counsellor identity was not a seamless process for Fulton. He described the addition of becoming an academic researcher to his counsellor identity in this way, “The word would be tension between the two and I am in the middle.” In his case “academic training has moved me away from counselling and now I am moving toward this sense of becoming an academic researcher.” In fact, “I’d say it’s been a negative tension in the sense that

it continuously undermines my counselling identity. The tension is not contributing anything positive to the counselling.” He went on to explain the dilemma of trying to reconcile these two identities, “It is really the graduate studies that have introduced a big tension with respect to professional identity where I am being pulled away from the counselling work. So that for me really stands as the force that has challenged my counselling identity.” He elaborated on this evolution of a new or separate identity created during his professional identity construction whether part of past or newly realized values using the metaphor of neural networks:

If we talk about the neural networks this is the formation of a completely different network . . . so in a way, let’s say this is at the abstract level, abstract values, they are now giving rise to being realized now in this network, in the counselling network and then later on in my life these values again have produced another offspring . . . they were realized in a different way and that would be the academic research network.

Using the metaphor of light and shadow Fulton summarized this reconciliation of his existing and anticipated identity with these words:

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 and shrinking . . . one will overshadow the other so if that academic light is so strong and powerful, the counselling identity in a way is in a big, big shadow.

Fulton’s description highlighted the dimension of permanence relative to his counsellor identity as another consideration in the layering process.

This concludes the summary of the five groupings of themes discussed by the interview participants. To recap, the participants spoke about negotiating tensions and ratifying their counsellor identity. They also offered their thoughts on the mechanisms used in their identity construction process. Moving to a deeper level of explanation they considered the meaning and sense making processes in their identity work. Counsellors talked about embracing their identity project across the lifespan and finished with a detailed account of how they build as well as transmit the rich dimensionality of their professional identity. The next section introduces the virtual focus group and some of the themes that emerged during their collaborative dialogue about counsellor identity.

Virtual Focus Group

There were fourteen counsellors who took part in the virtual focus group and they are introduced here using a pseudonym to provide a detailed picture of the focus group composition. Limitations associated with the data collection instrument (a learning management system) and wanting to allow focus group participants the option of posting anonymously (if and when they chose) precluded the use of pseudonyms for the discussion forum and reporting purposes. There were four student counsellors, five novice counsellors (i.e., <5 years experience), and five experienced counsellors (i.e., >5 years) in the virtual focus group.

Four of the focus group participants, Abigail, Dorothy, Holden and Jacinta were students currently completing graduate studies in counselling. Abigail is 47 years of age and has had other careers prior to her recent decision to become a counsellor. This is a first career for Dorothy who is 48 years of age and pursuing a graduate degree in educational psychology. Holden is 29 years of age and a licensed teacher completing his studies in educational counselling. Jacinta is a 24 year old counsellor-in-training who identifies her theoretical orientation as client-centered and narrative.

There were five novice counsellors, Blanche, Cleo, Inez, Lark, and Nadori who participated in the virtual focus group however each practiced in quite different settings and integrated various theoretical approaches in their work. Blanche is 30 years of age and a licensed teacher as well as a counsellor. She has a private practice and specializes in both adventure and animal assisted therapy. At 28 years of age Cleo is currently working in the counselling services of a university using a number of theoretical approaches (i.e., gestalt, existential, transactional analysis, cognitive behavioural) to assist students. Inez is 29 years old and holds a graduate degree in community mental health counselling as well as professional membership with both the ACA and CCPA. Lark is 47 years of age and a novice counsellor with a private practice following a transition from her previous careers. She refers to herself as a counselling therapist, psychotherapist, or a career counsellor. The last of the novice counsellors is Nadori who is 56 years of age and works in a non-profit community resource centre serving a broad range of clients. She brings a number of theoretical approaches to her work such as emotion-focused, narrative, and humanistic/experiential.

The remaining five participants in the focus group, Emmylou, Faith, Greer, Kieran, and Magnolia were all experienced counsellors. Emmylou is 62 years of age and a mental health

therapist in private practice in a rural setting. Faith is a registered nurse and an experienced counsellor who also identifies as a psychotherapist in her private practice work where she uses cognitive behavioural approaches. Greer is 56 years of age and a registered marriage and family therapist working within a rural family health team. She uses a number of titles to identify herself including clinical counsellor, mental health therapist, counsellor, and psychotherapist. Kieran is 51 years of age and as a psychotherapist trained in cognitive behavioural and interpersonal psychotherapy she holds membership with a number of professional associations. She holds a doctoral degree in her field and currently is a member of a family health team and manages a private practice. Magnolia is 48 years old and currently works in community non-profit counselling services where she draws upon cognitive behavioural, existentialism, and client-centered theoretical approaches to assist clients.

Emerging themes. The thematic analysis of the virtual focus group yielded five organizing themes. The five themes were as follows a) purposefully journeying toward a counsellor identity, b) needing to negotiate counsellor identity, c) continuing to modify and refine counsellor identity, d) sensing an inherent connection with counsellor identity and nurturing self-definition, and e) portraying self as a professional counsellor. A number of subthemes were associated with each of the organizing themes and these will be outlined in each of the sections to follow.

Purposefully journeying toward a counsellor identity. This first theme was about the intentionality, decision making, and purpose seeking actions taken by focus group participants as they moved toward embracing their counsellor identity. Under this particular theme were two subthemes: a) being a counsellor was a way to find meaning or life purpose through helping others, and b) feeling a sense of belonging with counsellors and the profession.

Finding meaning and life purpose through helping others. For a number of the focus group participants, becoming a counsellor was a way to meet their strong drive to help others. One participant talked about the length of time and personal determination needed to make this life purpose a reality:

I have spent almost a decade “seeking” a way to make my professional aspirations become reality, and there is immense satisfaction in attaining the goal. Also, I am heavily influenced by self-determination theory, which states that people are motivated by three innate needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Becoming a counsell[or] fills that need, the sense that you make a useful contribution to the world around you.

This drive to help others seemed to form a continuous thread in their evolving career and becoming a counsellor was another step toward actualizing this life purpose:

I have been a counsellor for four years . . . and a nurse for over three decades. I could not imagine doing anything else in my life. There is nothing more rewarding than helping people. As counsellors we are in a privileged position and it is a[n] honour for me to be with the client as they unpack their story. I am in private practice and have a great deal of auto[no]my, which is also important for me.

Although finding meaning through helping others was a valued part of this counsellor's identity, she understood the necessity of balancing this with personal well being: "I've been having trouble with burnout, I've been struggling to let go of the part of my identity that wants to help everyone . . . I've also had to teach myself not to live for helping others, but live while I just happen to be helping others."

Sense of belonging with counsellors and the profession. Another reason given by participants for journeying toward a counsellor identity was experiencing a sense of belonging. For some it was finding affinity with individuals who understood what it was to be a counsellor: "I feel the most belonging on a personal level with people I work with and friends who do this work even if they're not in our organization. I find that the sense of belonging comes from the sharing of common experiences/feelings/challenges which bonds us together into a community." It was also about wanting to emulate these individuals who held similar beliefs and worldviews, "We see other counsellors and how they act, work, speak, etc. and we identify with those people who share our values/our counselling theory and we strive to be somewhat like them."

Being connected with other counsellors was seen as fairly significant for the purpose of supporting one another, "A sense of belonging is needed . . . Counsellors should be getting together to have discussion groups every so often, where counsellors of different agencies get together in a closed group setting so they can talk about issues with each other." Others expressed dismay when it was absent fearing the lack of solidarity might threaten the status of counsellors, "A sense of belonging is important to me . . . Currently there is no sense of belonging to any cohesive group or college, so I feel that as a profession we are sometimes sidelined." One person downplayed the importance of an affiliation with fellow counsellors saying it was, "not very important for me, at this point in my career. I have been getting odd ball counselling jobs and where I've worked I had no colleagues." Having some ongoing connection with other counsellors be it in the workplace, at conferences, or through professional associations

was not always a given but critical for the professional well-being of counsellors, “I find the work is difficult and isolating, and if I didn’t have some sense of camaraderie with other counsellors I would probably have a lot harder time persisting with this career.”

Feeling a need to belong, this counsellor expressed some of the frustrations and challenges of trying to sustain this tenuous link with professional colleagues as they moved from student to novice:

I don’t always feel a[s] sense of belonging. When in the first few years of your career many things that allow you to engage are just out of your reach financially as everything is so expensive to join. As a student there was assistance to attend conferences and workshops but as a new counsellor working whatever you can to make ends meet is just what it takes and in the years when a sense of belonging would be most critical it is really hard to obtain unless you are working full time with other counsellors.

Two other participants also recognized the value of securing a link not only with counsellors but also with the profession itself seeing this as integral to the construction of their identity as a counsellor. This is what one person said:

A sense of belonging with the overall profession of counselling has always been very important to me and I longed for this sense of belonging for much of my early career. My sense is that this search for belonging is related to the development of my counsellor professional identity. For many years I had an idea that there was more of a sense of belonging in agencies other than where I was working because I have never worked in a “counselling” agency. I have for the most part work[sic] in multi-disciplinary agencies where people are doing very different jobs and the counselling department has been typically quite small . . . I have come to believe that even in a counselling agency people can be without a sense of belonging because of the nature of the work that we do – working one on one with clients behind closed doors . . . A sense of belonging remains very important to me today but what that means to me and how it is achieved has significantly changed over time.

This was expanded on by another focus group participant during the discussion:

It is really important to identify with a profession that links to my sense of values, and to feel part of an organisation that is considered an ethical source of information for clients. In relation to professional development, it is important to feel a sense of belonging with others who share the same professional needs, concerns, interests and again, values. To feel part of something that is supportive of my own growth and professional identity.

Needing to negotiate counsellor identity. This second theme spoke to the periods of transition and associated tension the focus group participants were experiencing along the way to ratifying their counsellor identity. Three subthemes underpinned this organizing theme: a)

facing uncertainty and tensions, b) reconciling and responding to transition demands, and c) being cognizant of influencing elements.

Facing uncertainty and tensions. Much of the tension counsellors expressed during the focus group discussions was associated with change events that created confusion and sometimes interfered with the development of their identity as a counsellor. For one person who was a counsellor-in-training this ambiguity had the potential to be career long and they spoke about their trepidation, “I’m sure work experience will open my eyes to a wide variety of situations, it will humble me, it will likely never be easy and there may never be a clear cut path for us to take.” Another student expressed their bewilderment with the potential changes to titles and scope of practice following from the regulatory college:

I would say the ‘not Knowing’ [sic] leads to an inability to construct a professional identity with confidence. I am training to do *this*. I may only be allowed to do *that*, or I may not be allowed to do anything at all. And I may be able to do it all, but with some bogus title like ‘case worker’ or ‘life coach’, Ick.

The tensions of negotiating their counsellor identity amid this climate of unknowing was compounded for some by frequently feeling “undervalued”. Some cited the lack of “appropriate compensation” while others highlighted instances when they did not receive the “respect of other professionals” or were held in low esteem by “non-counselling coworkers” or their boss. These aggravations seemed to be diminishing the identity this counsellor held in high regard, “The things that make it difficult to maintain esteem for this chosen art are the low pay, difficulties finding employment as a counsellor, lack of job opportunities in hospitals and with the government . . . bickering in the field about what we are called.”

Other challenges confronting these counsellors as they undertook their identity work were the proposed changes associated with regulatory legislation that were being rolled out sporadically. Unsure of the impact on their identity, this counsellor felt disconcerted but also a bit saddened by seemingly falling short:

The biggest external barrier, of course, are the moving goalposts of licensing today . . . it’s extremely frustrating when you are trying to do it “right”, and no matter what you do it’s never enough . . . I don’t know if that challenges my identity, but I would say it’s my biggest fear!

Another individual expressed consternation with decisions that called into question their training/education perhaps necessitating a re-negotiation of what it is to be a counsellor, “When

they came up with “psychotherapist” and “mental health therapist” both having the same scope of practice but different training requirements I was really pissed off. It made me feel like the education I have (Masters) is not valued, because clearly, they don’t mind diluting what it means to do our job.” Still others fear the tensions brought by this change event may become so challenging they may decide not to bother negotiating but abandon this identity entirely:

I think it is also possible the new college will do nothing for the profession, or even become counter-productive. And we’ll have a whole bunch of confused, angry counsellors who thought this was the magic potion that would change things, but it did not . . . It’s possible that I will have burnt out and have changed careers. Or did not burn out, but decided that I had enough of counselling and it was time to look for new things.

Drawing on their metaphor, one participant expressed their view on some of these tensions and how they remained quite hopeful:

Perhaps the metaphor of soup describes how I’m feeling about the college process. A lot of different ingredients get thrown into the pot by various cooks. They stirred around. A bit of spice gets tossed in. Someone tries to skim off the fat. It’s stirred some more and left to simmer for a long time. We can only hope the result is a success.

For some the tensions associated with this change event were no different from those past or one’s yet to come; both were powerless to halt their identity work, “I imagine that any event at all will contribute to shaping one’s professional identity. I have been generally coping with all the uncertainty around regulation by not investing too much into it. I’m not sure how one could even attempt to stop constructing an identity.”

Reconciling and responding to transition demands. Part of the identity construction process as focus group participants highlighted was about moving through periods of transition as professional counsellors and at times the way forward was not entirely clear. One participant also pointed out how these transitional moments were often not evident nor anticipated, “I’m not sure if I’ve ever been so purposeful or cognitive about these transitions. I feel like these transitions “just happen” and you deal with it as it comes . . . So I suppose going from “healthy counsellor” to “burnt out counsellor” was quite a large transition, which I am just realizing as I write this.” While moving through what they felt were identity transition periods, another participant described how these became a catalyst for reviewing professional self-care:

Engergizing, demanding, natural, unsettling...as well as intense, steep learning curve, challenging, intimidating at times. On the other hand the ride has been exhilarating, tremendously rewarding, and almost consciousness-expanding! With each transition

period I have had to step back and revisit my stress management techniques, pay meticulous attentions to self-care.

Responding to the demands of a transition period that accompanied a new counsellor job, one participant spoke about coming to terms with workplace values that were contrary to their own, “What was really demanding is trying to assess whether my ethics fit with my job/and my job with my ethics.” Having experienced multiple instances of identity changeovers, this individual highlighted the growth potential when these shifts occur:

Identity transitions for me have for the most part have included: feeling great excitement and anxiety. From client to employee; counsellor-aide to counsellor; student to counsellor; student to program coordinator; counsellor to counsellor in a new job/new field; and counsellor to intern supervisor. For the most part these transitions were wonderful . . . demanding with steep learning curves . . . feelings of self-doubt . . . growing awareness of what I did not know . . . hope for the future.

With the introduction of some preliminary legislation and regulatory changes taking place counsellors in the focus group outlined some of the ways they were approaching this transitional period. Fine-tuning of their identity was how one counsellor described their tactic, “I think we are always making small refinements over time, adapting as society, the culture, or worldview, our workplace changes, but I do not anticipate any big or significant changes in my identity as a therapist due to the upcoming legislation.” Another person was going to strategically work through this transition period by finding a way to reconcile her own identity needs as a counsellor with external demands:

If bureaucrats wish to change the wording of what I do . . . fine...I will dance the dance and get my papers to legitimize my art. The words of the legislation say we are “psychotherapists”, but I will use the common vernacular of counsellor because I want to, because it fits my training and countless others around the world, and because my clients know what that means.

For some, negotiating counsellor identity during transition periods requires an entrepreneurial approach. This counsellor eluded that, “If bureaucratic regulation demands that I change to fit a particular identity, then I will deal with that change. I think that I have become sufficiently qualified with excellent recommendations such that I can fit a number of slots. If not, then I will find the particular slot that fits my qualifications, or make my own slot.” This kind of ownership in the face of a change event and transition phase was metaphorically represented by one focus group participant, “My metaphor would be finding an opening in the

woods, perhaps illuminated by sunlight, and striking out, possibly on my own as a trailblazer, finding my own way . . . This quote caught my eye: “Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is not path and leave a trail.”

Cognizant of influencing elements. During the focus group discussions participants underscored the impact a group of factors, both human and situational which were pivotal to the successful negotiation of their counsellor identity. Within certain workplace settings counsellors said they needed to clarify their role and find where they fit in but were cautious about making unsound identity amendments:

Some organizations may have different views on certain practices, and thus we would have different ideas on the roles we should play/how we should behave . . . I personally think we need to have our own foundation of how we see ourselves as a counsellor . . . When we get into the workforce we need to negotiate and try to work our own identity in with what the workplace expects – hopefully not something completely out of line with our own perceptions.

As much as the workplace challenged and at times unsettled their identity some participants found their client work became a powerful counter force. One participant put it this way, “I feel most a counsellor when I am working with a client, listening profoundly and providing a supportive and safe atmosphere for growth.” Another person included their time spent reflecting on client progress as influential, “My most profound sense of being a counsellor is when I am working with a client, or when I am alone, thinking about my work . . . more when I am one-on-one at work, or reflecting on a time of client change.”

Individuals who acted as mentors during the formation of their professional identity were also mentioned in the discussion. One person related an identity building period involving a professor who required them to make daily journal entries regarding their experiences in counselling practice and how it impacted them: “By the end of the two weeks we had a strong sense of identity . . . my interactions with that professor developed my sense of identity and gave me confidence that this was the right direction for me to go.” Another element that had this level of impact on the negotiation of counsellor identity was the training received and one participant offered this explanation of the process:

I think my identity as a counsellor is strengthened by two things—coursework and practice. When I am in class, I am thinking about how to apply the knowledge I’ve acquired in a practical way, and my mind comes up with real-life examples of how and where the knowledge would be applicable. And of course, when I’m actually sitting with someone, what they say triggers a response in me related to the things I’ve learned.

When theory and practice comes together, that's when I feel like I'm actually the person I'm training to be.

Continuing to modify and refine counsellor identity. The third theme captured some of the tangible strategies, skills, and behaviours employed by this group of counsellors during the progressive unfolding of their counsellor identity. The main theme reflected the overall shaping process and this was broken down into three subthemes: a) sculpting the identity – agency, ownership, and craftsmanship, b) establishing identity is a lifelong project, and c) building skills and accessing resources.

Sculpting the identity – agency, ownership, and craftsmanship. A number of the participants felt a strong sense of agency for personalizing and shaping their identity as a counsellor. One person stated, “I definitely have a sense of agency about navigating my professional identity. I make choices regarding continuing education, reading material, personal interests and consulting with colleagues.” Another remarked, “I think being a counsellor is what you make it to be.” Someone else described the customization of their identity as a personally crafted undertaking:

I believe the role I play in shaping my identity is in what I choose to focus on . . . the different organizations I choose to work in . . . specializing in different areas . . . and then I think a big part of it is how I take my learning and my practice and piece them together. The piecing together helps me identify who I am as a counsellor.

Counsellors did not exclude the influence external factors might have as they tailored their professional identity but often these were secondary considerations, “I believe it is ultimately up to me to define my own identity though of course there are outside influences. My professional association sets standards and approves training that they deem appropriate for our profession and thereby communicates who we're supposed to be . . . Same with my place of work.” Another person had a similar feeling but pointed out that taking ownership for the customization meant standing by these choices at times:

I think currently I feel that the biggest factor is really in myself at this point. I had a work setting that was creating an identity that I did not like so I changed it and am as a result only working in the field one day a week in private practice and work in a different field the rest of the time.

The shaping process was equated with craftsmanship and identity was in a state of becoming, “For me it is a professional becoming process with some crafting as I learn a new

technique from more training, gain information from being up on best practices and the latest research, etc.” One participant felt a degree of permission and invitation to customize was part of the counsellor identity, “I think what makes counsellors unique – from each other and from other related professionals – is the scope for individual style that counselling/psychotherapy allows and even encourages.”

Establishing identity a lifelong project. The construction of counsellor identity was viewed as a lifelong undertaking punctuated by periods of personal and professional growth, learning new skills, and adapting to evolving roles. “Identity construction, for me, is a never ending journey that evolves with professional and personal experiences.” It was as a project, a life endeavour, “Definitely a lifelong project! I hope that I can maintain “beginner’s mind” and a fresh sense of curiosity throughout my life while being prepared to learn again and again!” Another spoke about different phases they had experienced in their evolving process, “At first there is stagnation . . . simplistic thinking, then confusion . . . questioning and instability, and finally integration where there is reorganization...a crystallization.” The learning was seen as perpetual but welcomed by another who had this to say:

My professional identity has changed SO much in the last 3 years and I foresee it changing some more as I learn, do the work, add new learning, new tasks, etc. I am the kind of person who is always open to learning and shaping who I am, so I’m pretty sure this will go on forever.

There was also some clarification by others that although their professional identity was “established but evolving” they had an enduring sense of themselves as counsellors, “I must say in the last couple of years I have often felt that I do know who I am as a counsellor – that my identity has become solidified. That is not to say that I will not continue to change and evolve and learn new things and even change my role as I evolve in my career.” Another participant offered further explanation on how this “solid foundation” was added to and refined over the life-career span:

It’s a lifelong process . . . Just like with our identity who we are outside our profession. We may have a solid foundation, have our core values that we believe in, but as we practice, experience more and more problems/situations, we mold and adapt. Our client’s experiences, and our own experiences shape us. We learn something new every day, and though our identity may not change drastically each day, things add on or get removed or modified over time.

Building skills and accessing resources. Part of the identity construction work done by participants involved periods of building, modifying and ongoing refinement during which they augmented existing skills and took opportunities to proactively access a vast array of resources like furthering their academic training, contributing to the counselling scholarship, and fostering personal growth to name but a few. As a counselling intern, one participant felt receiving supervision was an important and trusted starting place:

Within the workplace environment, my expectations of how they can navigate my identity is to provide me with appropriate feedback as I am a beginner, and help me figure out who I am. I say this, because I will always wonder if I've done the right thing, or used the right approach.

There were numerous resources highlighted by the focus group participants that directly related in their estimation to the construction of their professional identity and this is a brief summary of their offerings:

My practicum experience; additional certification; connecting with other practitioners in healthcare for example medical doctors (family, addiction, psychiatrists), psychologists, social workers, nutritionists, personal trainers, life coaches, etc.); peer support at work; academic studies; clinical supervisors, peers and clients and related networks; established and clear code of ethics; development and distribution of professional materials on mental health and wellness; contributing to community newspapers, professional journals and speaking at conferences; ongoing personal work which helps me to better understand and identify how my personal history impacts my role and identity as a counsellor.

Sensing an inherent connection with counsellor identity and nurturing self-definition.

In this fourth theme many of the focus group members expressed some of the deep questioning, reflection, and intuitive feelings that surfaced while navigating the formative phases of their counsellor identity and beyond. Often it was through their internal dialogues and pursuit of identity integrity that they came to greater awareness of who they were as counsellors. The meaning behind this larger theme was conveyed using three subthemes: a) an innate sense or early identification with being a counsellor, b) reflection and self-questioning, and c) congruence between personal and professional self images.

An innate sense or early identification with being a counsellor. Deep identification with the counsellor identity and a profound, instinctive feel for counselling was expressed by a number of the focus group participants. One person stated, "I had always had a natural sense of being a counsellor and that always worked and was comfortable but when I put in intention in it it seemed to make things harder and less fluid, but the moment where it went back to natural

with intention is the moment I felt that profound sense of being a counsellor.” Often others heightened this sense of knowing, “Looking back at the comments she provided, I can see that they really reinforced my innate counselling skills that I was not aware I even possessed.” And again another similar encounter, “I experienced being told . . . I seemed to have a natural inclination for counselling . . . I was offered the opportunity to work as a relief staff/counsellor aide at one of these centres . . . I began to embrace the idea of becoming a counsellor.”

Sometimes it was acknowledging and finally fulfilling their innate longing to pursue the counsellor’s path, “**ENERGIZING.** When you finally start on the path you’ve dreamed of for so long and struggled so hard to attain . . . it’s exhilarating.” Early recognition and finally being there was captured in the comments of these two counsellors. The first, “It’s something I’ve wanted to do since I was 15, though I didn’t really actively start to pursue it until I was 38,” and the second person’s comment:

I try to show empathy and listen to the person’s problems. I let them vent to me and talk out their issue. I think the main thing is being there for people and showing them you care, people pick up on that and see you as a person they can turn to. It’s something I’ve always been for others, and now the counselling program is just promoting me to do this more and more.

Reflection and self-questioning. Nurturing self-definition through internal dialogue and reflective practice was another way counsellors shaped their identity, “I see the ‘inward moving communication’ as it relates to professional identity development as being meditation, contemplation, reflexive practice.” Often there was deep and at times intense self-questioning about the identity choice, “I also periodically have some existential questioning about the purpose of what we do as counsellors. The latter is often triggered by burn out and compassion fatigue – those two can really get me started on questioning whether this is worthwhile for me or worthwhile at all.” Reflection and self-questioning during the identity work seemed to strengthen their core beliefs as a counsellor, “My own mistakes have helped shape my professional identity as have the boundaries that I have clashed up against which have caused me to question, articulate and stand for what I believe in and what I am willing to do or not do.”

When asked what their preferred route was for nurturing their identity through some form of reflection, a number of responses were offered. For instance, this was what one person shared:

I would prefer a more private journal writing reflection. I think this helps me get in touch with my own ideas and thoughts without worrying what others may view my identity as...really lets you explore yourself in the comforts of your own space...with private

writing you can explore different areas and not worry if something is coming off wrong. You can test the waters and find out for yourself what feels comfortable for you.

Another individual spoke about “inward moving communication” in their metaphor about wine making:

When a viticulturist first plants vines, it takes many years before the wine becomes ‘itself’ . . . There is a lot of tweaking he [she] must do before the wine is an accurate description of the terroir, the grapes . . . To become an accurate reflection of who you are as a counsellor takes many years – constantly tweaking and reflecting on who you are and what you do.

Congruence between personal and professional self images. Another aspect of sensing a connection or resonance with being a counsellor was finding congruence between this professional self and their personal self-image:

I think for me it is about congruence between my personal and professional self. I am the same person both professionally and personally. I believe in living my values as a counsellor using the same philosophical approach in my day-to-day life. I use an existential-humanistic approach and utilize spiritual values. I am solidly rooted in CBT but also use mindfulness and acceptance. These approaches are all functional and practical for everyday living and make the counselling experience part of my outreach.

As much as one person sought reassurance in this harmony, “My identity as a counsellor and my personal identity are congruent so that as I grow as a person I also change and develop as a counsellor,” another was content with a less “intertwined” relation:

I don’t know if I connect to “being a counsellor” on such a personal level . . . I don’t know if my professional identity is SO strongly intertwined with my personal identity . . . I think for me it’s what I do, one of the things I am good at, and being a highly competent professional in a field I enjoy doing is important to me. But I don’t feel like I “AM” a counsellor.

Portraying self as a professional counsellor. This fifth and final theme spelled out some of the approaches this group of counsellors used to communicate who they were, what set them apart, and how they strengthened their identity. This theme was supported by two subthemes: a) highlighting distinctiveness, and b) being counsellor like – conduct, demeanour, and viewpoint.

Highlighting distinctiveness. Part of portraying their identity as counsellors was ensuring misconceptions held by other professionals, service providers, and even prospective employers were clarified by providing sound definitions about who they were and what they stood for.

There were a few ways focus group participants characterized and defined themselves. One person put it this way:

The idea of a counsellor for me is a professional who helps individuals in need but is more laid back. The idea of being underpaid comes to mind – for me, these professionals are intrinsically motivated to help others and accept less prestigious working conditions. Behind a warm smile, I also have the words “burn out” floating in my head. I’m also thinking of a sliding price scale.

Another explained that counsellors also maintain a level of integrity and offered this definition:

“A counsellor is also a champion of human rights and dignity, is warm and accepting, and knowledgeable. A counsellor walks their talk and is also personally committed to lifelong learning.” While for another, their definition was in the “artistry” and not some label or title:

The art of counselling is about helping people to grow, develop and evolve beyond blockages and limitations and to do so with health and balance. Based on this art, have we really done our best with the wording? Are we at an end-game with counsellor identity? No way. We are temporarily using the title psychotherapist but the art is too big for this word. WE are too big as beings to be pigeon-holed.

Often in order to communicate who they were, these counsellors found themselves using qualifiers, pointing to areas of difference with allied health professions, and even then misconceptions could still prevail. “When I tell people I am a counsellor, I need to make sure I add the terms mental health before that otherwise they look at me confused. And to save the trouble of explaining what I do, I simplify it even more by adding mental health. I think the terminology is just too new for people to have a general idea of what the role entails.” This account spoke to some of the confusion experienced in communicating what a counsellor is:

Others know I am a counsellor because that’s how I identify myself to clients and other professionals . . . They immediately seem to know that I’m the digging-around-in-your-mind-and-soul type...I work at a centre that has “counselling” in the name, the whole centre refers to our professional activity as “counselling”, my door sign says counsellor . . . so that gives a clue to the outside . . . Despite all that I described above about my professional environment labelling me as a “counsellor”, I’ve had many clients who think I’m a psychologist or even psychiatrist! And I explain the difference, and even than at times it’s like it makes no difference to them.

There was an exchange of frustrations during the focus group discussions on how to resolve this dilemma, “It shouldn’t be so difficult, yet I agree with your process, because without displaying it everywhere, and without educating and without using it like everyday lingo, people will

continue to wonder what it even means.” The communication of counsellor identity was not only about definitional parameters and means for differentiating, it was also about depiction.

Being counsellor like – conduct, demeanour, and viewpoint. Focus group participants were forthcoming about how their behaviour, self-presentation, and attitudes messaged to others that they were counsellors:

What confirms my counsellor-ness for me is when I help others (not clients) understand what a client is going through or how they can approach a certain problematic with an individual. I have also done interventions around non-counsellor individuals . . . such situations remind me that not everyone has the theoretical knowledge or experience with the ‘helping relationship’.

A number of participants gave examples of ethical and professional behaviour they personally associated with being a counsellor such as: respecting client confidentiality, being non-judgemental, maintaining professional boundaries, using empathy, seeking supervision, secure record keeping, neat appearance, organized office with diplomas/accreditation displayed, clarity about roles and expectations, client empowerment/strengths-based counselling philosophy, and positive relationship/communication with allied professions.

Sometimes this “counsellor-ness” was embedded in soft-skills, a viewpoint, or certain attributes exuded, “I think most of it has to do with our behaviour, how we carry ourselves, how we treat others. People pick up on your genuineness, on the fact that you’re being open, showing empathy, all those basic skills of counselling.” Often it was in the subtle telling:

I don’t think there is a specific outward way of telling others we are counsellors...it is critical to remain impartial with how we present ourselves with regards to our appearance. I don’t think we carry a sign on our foreheads that says we are counsellors . . . nor do we outright walk around telling random people we are counsellors. Perhaps, in the way we talk, our subtle non-verbal cues may give another individual a sense that we are counsellor-like because we may tend to ask questions that allow the other to discuss rather than tell them what to do.

Some felt the portrayal was grounded in something much deeper and went on to clarify this:

There seems to be a belief system that we seem to adapt to in this identity of “counsellor” there are all these elements about holism, ethics, client-centeredness, authenticity, etc. This stuff is almost like a spiritual component – none of those are factual things, yet believing in them seems to be an integral part of counsellor identity to take a certain viewpoint on the world.

There was validity in the identity portrayal because of this and their concluding statement was:

“My image is authenticity . . . what you see is what you get.”

This section has summarized the themes from the *within case* narratives gleaned from the ten individual interview participants and the fourteen members of the virtual focus group captured during the discussion forum. There were five organizing themes and a number of subthemes that emerged from the interview data that have been presented. The thematic analysis of the virtual focus group yielded five organizing themes and a number of subthemes as well which have also been discussed. The next section will present the themes from the between case analysis.

Between Case Narratives

This section deepens the thematic analysis by looking at the entire data set (i.e., includes individual interviews, the virtual focus group, observation, and document review) through three appropriate (i.e., to the research question) and germane perspectives or ‘lenses’ to uncover compelling or unexpected understandings that surface from looking between the different subunits. The first perspective focused on the various experience levels (i.e., student, novice, and experienced counsellors) of participants in relation to their identity work. The second perspective took into account the different practice settings of the study participants. And the final perspective considered the role of specialized practice/training (i.e., career, marriage and family) on counsellor identity construction. Because all of the data (i.e., anonymous and identified) is grouped for this level of the analysis verbatim quotes will appear without identifiers in this section for purposes of consistency.

Experience Levels

Looking at the three experience levels of participants which were student (i.e., counsellor-in-training, internship student), novice counsellor (i.e., < 5 years experience), and experienced counsellor (i.e., > 5 years experience), strengthening identity was the main theme identified.

Strengthening identity. Participants spoke about growing and sustaining their professional identity specifying how certain factors like competence, autonomy, self-doubt, or validation could fortify or weaken their identity strength. This fluctuated from one counsellor to the next according to their experience level (i.e., student, novice, experienced) and the circumstances that prevailed across their career life-span as evidenced in their accounts. For instance, the word “fragile” was used by one internship participant to describe this asset while others highlighted it’s tentativeness for counsellors-in-training saying, “I am scared and not

confident in my skills as a new counsellor,” and “As I started to get an idea of what counsellors actually did, started building up that identity, the whole experience became much more positive.” Another participant who was approaching graduation expressed some of the trepidation surrounding upcoming regulatory changes and how it was unsettling for nascent counsellors:

I hear everybody discussing it and I noticed how most students are frustrated with what is going on . . . Yeah, so a lot of people are frustrated because they feel victimized because why is this happening to me now like I am just trying to get through this degree and when I am done I may not even be done because I may have to do additional things to qualify me properly.

This particular challenge to identity strength (i.e., regulation) was seen as less problematic for one counsellor-in-training who felt time might present some advantage not at the disposal of their novice counselling colleagues, “I don’t think I need to think about that for another while whereas they need to start planning for it now.”

Novice counsellors reported more concern and directed effort to sustain their reserve of identity strength. Some collaboratively tackled this need, “There are a few of us who are new counsellors also, novice counsellors so we actually created a little peer supervision just the three of us because the larger group is great but different in some of the struggles or challenges we might have.” New counsellors faced their own set of challenges to their identity strength such as economic limitations of “working whatever you can to make ends meet” or “feeling under-compensated” and even more frustrating “how can I get experience if no one hires me.” Another set of challenges related to inadequate support started with “not having clinical supervision” or “taking on too much which results in exhaustion and eventual burnout” and coming down to “trying to survive as best I could.” Novice counsellors also felt upcoming regulatory changes added an extra burden to the already demanding work of strengthening their identity in this middle stage, “I did get very jaded about keeping abreast” and “the moving goalposts of licensing today . . . it’s extremely frustrating when you are trying to do it ‘right’ and no matter what you do it’s never enough.”

Unlike their novice colleagues, the counsellors who had more years of experience reported less concerns with maintaining their identity strength. Professional reputation and “riding credentials” were sources of identity strength as one person explained:

It has to do with, some of my identity comes with the territory . . . in some ways I don’t feel I have to work as someone who has just graduated and they want to make their mark

in their community. My mark comes with my position . . . so I don't worry about that but it is almost a sense of entitlement you know.

Identity strength was grounded in credentials, reputation, competence, recognition, and taking initiative according to experienced counsellors. In some instances strength from previous careers and professional identities was drawn upon, "I feel confident in my role as a professional therapist. I have many experiences as a nurse and I have brought this into my role as a psychotherapist. Similar to nursing an individual begins as a novice and eventually becomes an expert through experience and confidence." Challenges posed by upcoming regulatory changes were being taken in stride by experienced counsellors, "I know who I am in my profession and I know what I can do" and "I believe it will lend more professionalism and credibility to our work." Having established some of the factors that strengthened their identity over time, their focus was on maintenance and to remain informed.

Practice Settings

Looking between the various practice settings (i.e., community/non-profit, private practice, rural mental health services) the predominant theme was characterization of counsellor identity.

Characterization of counsellor identity. Counsellor identity is categorized and at times portrayed by both the counsellor and those in the practice setting based on that particular environment. Practicing in a community non-profit agency one participant commented, "I just feel grounded because I am in this welcoming, holistic environment . . . I just feel lucky to have found a place like this to grow as a counsellor" because "there is also a community involved that helps identify that professional identity." Working in a rural private practice and a rural community mental health center were two practice settings that had uniquely shaped participant's counsellor identity, "Where I live as a rural [individual] has changed my professional identity . . . When I first moved to the rural . . . I thought I was losing touch with the dynamism I guess of the urban area and the profession . . . if you don't connect, you feel like you have retired too early." Add in the private practice factor, "You have to be proactive, you have to take the initiative . . . and working in private practice you feel like you are cut off. You don't have the network of peers and support when you work by yourself in a rural area." Being proactive about identity building was part of the rural experience but the temperament and portrayal of counsellor identity was also aligned with the spirit of the setting:

I feel as if I am much more readily accepted as a counsellor than I would be if I described myself as a psychotherapist. Awareness of mental health issues is lacking in rural areas as well as access to adequate care. My own area is definitely in need of more mental health professionals, is economically deprived with high unemployment, many single parents, and a high proportion of elderly people. Sliding fee scales are very much appreciated . . . keeping a relatively high profile in the community by volunteering and using community facilities is also valuable.

Counselling Specialization

A number of participants had designations and training in specialized areas of counselling practice such as marriage and family therapy, addictions, couples work, art therapy, crisis/trauma, animal assisted therapy, and career counselling. Specialization was a factor in the identity construction of some counsellors and there were two apparent themes: an extra level of advocacy and the priority identity.

Extra level of advocacy. Identity negotiated within a context of counselling specialization often required an additional level of advocacy as they might need to promote both their counsellor and specialist identity (i.e., career, addictions). One participant described the negotiation of both identities as “this back and forth translating” and some of the tensions:

I also have a very, very special skill set . . . I didn't add this onto my counsellor this was part of my identity . . . you have this sense of . . . you're trying to protect the piece of the pie that you are starting off with. Whereas the regular counsellor doesn't have that kind of sense that I'm protecting something... art therapists are not given a space at all in any of the orders. So they are actually called, they are considered null . . . they just kind of say it's an adjunct. I hate to be called adjunct.

Knowing when to pursue an extra level of advocacy for the specialization is not always clear cut and from this account has created undue stress on both identities:

I feel like it is kind of sad that I have to identify as a career counsellor and not just a counsellor . . . to me it is unfortunate there is this distinction has to occur. You are a counsellor or you are a career counsellor...that's not right, but yet in order to advocate for career counselling I still have to perpetuate some of that distinction too and that kind of tears at me in a little way. And I think that is probably a problem that other people who advocate for career counselling also experience is that they are other-ing themselves in effort just to be heard.

Priority identity. Selecting a priority identity where some part of their identity becomes less important or put aside in order to fall under certain designation, titles, roles, or to meet

regulatory changes was discussed by participants. One person explained how “career is a very important piece” and using the metaphor of putting on a hat explained the prioritization process:

Because of the environments I have worked in it is my primary hat and it is more like I keep the psychotherapist hat in my back pocket. I think the way that most counsellors work is they have the career counsellor hat in their back pocket and whip it out as needed. I do the other way. I am mostly wearing the career counsellor hat and once in a while I will whip out the psychotherapy hat as needed . . . I identify myself as a career counsellor . . . I feel more connected to the notion of being a career counsellor than just being a counsellor.

The selection of a priority identity was viewed by another participant as an expedient way to communicate and any re-prioritization was their purview. Limitations posed by regulation could alter the benefits of this flexibility as they explained:

When I talk about using art therapist or counsellor or other titles I might use, trainer or whatever I’m the one who gets to choose when to use that, when it’s convenient for me. I doesn’t change the way I think about myself, it’s just convenient to talk about that with different people whereas I think when the province seeks out regulation it’s an external force that says you now have to identify your practice or what you are doing under this title and I think that could be confining for some people because they might not see themselves as only psychotherapists.

This section has summarized the themes from the *between case* narratives gathered from the individual interviews and virtual focus group discussion forum. There were three organizing themes and a number of subthemes that emerged from the data that were presented. The next section will present the themes from the across case analysis.

Across Case Narratives

Global Themes

This is the final of the three sections and it looks across all of the themes and patterns that emerged from the case narratives in relation to the research questions and associated issues for broad global themes. The focus was on identifying overarching themes that explained how counsellor identity was negotiated, shaped, and portrayed by participants during their construction process. *Five global or macro themes* encompassed the findings and yielded the overall interpretation: a) sense of agency, b) organic, emergent growth, c) guided by values, d) safeguard identity integrity, and e) adaptive shifting. A provisional model is offered to explain how these five themes work together and provide new understandings. The macro themes were

also examined in light of the summary findings captured in the graphic elicitation diagram. Once again, because all of the data (i.e., anonymous and identified) is grouped for this level of the analysis verbatim quotes will appear without identifiers in this section for purposes of consistency.

Sense of agency. This theme captures the agential component of the identity construction process which was manifested in the experiential accounts of study participants. The central tenet is counsellors are proactive agents, not passive actors when it comes to shaping their identity. Sculpting the counsellor identity entails a degree of intentionality in actions whether through skill development, academic pursuits, resource building, honing a specialization, or even the simple inclusion of ambient lighting in the counselling workspace. Ownership of this professional creation makes authorship of the identity narrative an imperative, something fought for and upheld by shifting or “pivoting the identity” when necessary. The assertion here is any portrayal or shaping of the counsellor identity is unreservedly orchestrated to enhance “counsellor-ness” and its fundamental essence. Certainly counsellors drew from personal and professional self-images, incorporated input of professional mentors, colleagues, clients, and at times were left to ponder the gems from nebulous happenstance events but this was part of the crafting. Facing the exogenous change event of unfolding statutory regulation, although an unprecedented factor pushing up against existing counsellor identity, it was for most part another opportunity to take ownership. The construction process involved periods of deep self-questioning, personal sacrifice, reconciling discrepancies between their existing identity and anticipated refinements, steadfast perseverance and adjusting the identity edges as they judged necessary.

Organic, emergent growth. This theme embodies the iterative, burgeoning growth that permeates the lifelong work of creating, shaping, and assembling the counsellor identity. Symbols of this dynamic process of becoming surfaced in the metaphors and diagrams of participants as: upward moving arrow trees, a shape emerging from the potter’s hand, the concentric growth rings of a tree, and journeying an auspicious, winding path. The main precept is that identity evolves continually along a trajectory punctuated with moments where counsellors experience discord, crystallization, and doubt but they acknowledge and endure the fluidity of this “ebb and flow.” Fuelling and sustaining the strength of their identity as counsellors was subject to chance events, burnout, finding their professional “tribe,” lack of

employment, fortuitous mentorship, economic worries, an inspirational book, and authentic engagement with clients in the therapy moment. The sense making process involved in identity construction that counsellors adopt is quite organic and recursive. This means continually applying each tentative modification or externally imposed alteration, as a function of their construction process, to those values, attributes, beliefs, and motives that uniquely define counsellor identity. Counsellors see this as an indefinite process with some envisioning this perpetual growth continuing right into their retirement years because it shapes an ostensible, enduring core. Depictions of journeying down this path of self-styled counsellor identity was pictured and described by respondents as “hopeful,” “sunlit,” with “blue skies,” and continually “moving toward happiness.”

Guided by values. This theme encapsulates the centrality of values, both personal and professional that inform the identity shaping and portrayal of ‘being’ a counsellor. Doing so meant following a desire to help others, finding a way to actualize life purpose and bring meaning, and answering a call originating in some innate sense or early identification with being a counsellor. The hypothesis is values are a driving force during the identity work and always weighed during any negotiation or communication of counsellor identity. Personal and professional values, beliefs, or worldview were intertwined, a kind of “mobius band” of inter-relatedness and aesthetic coherence. There was a feeling of being on the “right path” when individuals found a good fit with the counsellor identity and a belief the profession chooses the individual not the reverse. During identity shaping and construction values congruence was the goal but unexpected change events could compromise and precipitate an unwarranted recasting of them. Reconciling the conflict and tensions when identity divergence occurred or was anticipated, feeling a strain on personal or professional values, or discouraged when professional values are not resonant with personal or counselling ones had at times impeded the identity construction of participants. Some of this resulted in departures from workplaces where counsellor values were diminished, a fear of and experiencing counsellor burnout, lack of appropriate validation for a budding counsellor identity, deep existential questioning of life direction, and feeling “othered” for holding certain counsellor values. There were mechanisms counsellors activated during their identity negotiation to counter this and nurture self-definition because compromise on the values driving their identity did not sit well with participants.

Safeguard identity integrity. This theme isolates the dynamism and actions taken when change contexts precipitate a negotiation of counsellor identity and individuals move to safeguard the identity integrity. Against the backdrop of impending regulatory changes counsellors responded in varying degrees to the uncertainty and subsequent tensions of this transition period. They also reflected on critical life events or unexpected circumstances that had triggered a similar precautionary or guarded response when identity threats loomed small or large. Protecting the soundness of counsellor identity meant portraying and underscoring its distinctiveness, definitional parameters, multi-layered dimensionality, characterization in practice settings, and advocating for specializations. The assertion is identity construction involves more than shaping or creative aspects, a large part of identity work calls for ongoing negotiation because both internal transformation and exogenous events challenge the boundaries of what it means to be a counsellor. Small acts of resistance or “push back” by participants came in the form of acting the part of the bridging identity but not becoming it, making a new slot or sanctuary for the counsellor self, striking out on a new entrepreneurial path, and meeting requirements to legitimize but honouring and practicing the art of counselling. Responses are “emblematic of the values that [counsellors] stand for” and attempts to “curtail or constrain the expression of what they cherish” was expressed in metaphors and symbols of protest, critique, and a militant voice.

Adaptive shifting. This final theme covers another aspect of the dynamism of identity work and that is the willingness of counsellors to be adaptive, “chameleon” like, with their professional identity “ready to be dismantled.” This means counsellor identity is malleable and using the metaphor of “green clay” one participant likened the grappling, wrestling, and testing of its flexibility by the sculptor to their own re-fashioning process. Counsellors decide the form they are going to create, what to carve, when to solidify, whether to reconstitute, and once it is in the “fires of the kiln” they let it go. Challenges to the essence of their core identity prevail but as counsellors navigate unexpected transitions their willingness to be adaptive creates generative identity branches of expansion, amplification, or intensification (e.g., participant metaphors and diagrams depicting growth, adding identity layers to core identity, expanding upward like the arrow tree or shedding unneeded bits of identity shell, transformative mentorship experiences, augmenting skills/specialization). Adaptive shifting in the face of change was one important way counsellors negotiated their identity construction process but it was done selectively. Changes to

designations, titles, tasks, roles, and practice restrictions could muster adaptive skills as the discussions of regulation revealed, but infringements on counselling values imbued with personal beliefs was not an area counsellors were willing to dismantle. Being predisposed or willing to take on this kind of protean identity shifting was featured in the experiential accounts of these counsellors because it was more than just a part of their construction process, it was a unique identifier of “counsellor-ness.”

Graphic Elicitation Diagram

Prior to arriving at the final iteration of the graphic elicitation diagram two preliminary versions were established and underwent member checks. Version one (see Appendix P) of the graphic elicitation diagram was researcher generated and based on the themes emerging from the semi-structured interviews. The second version (see Appendix P) of the graphic elicitation diagram was a modification of the first one following feedback from the interview participants and this was shown to the virtual focus group participants. The final version (Figure 2) incorporates the modifications suggested by the focus group members during the discussion forum.

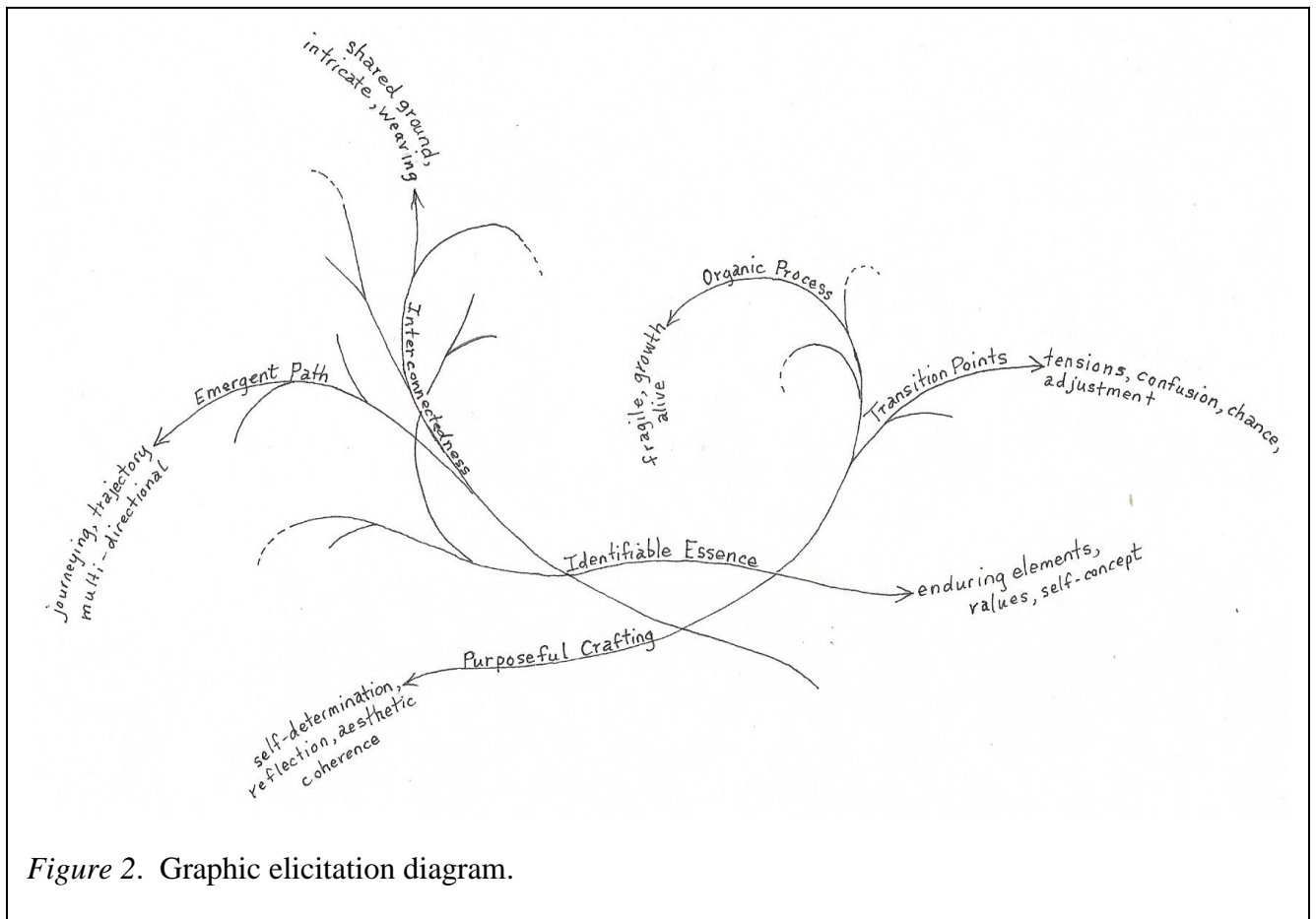


Figure 2. Graphic elicitation diagram.

The summary findings captured in the graphic elicitation diagram were examined in light of the five global themes. There were some similarities and also points of departure between the themes discussed. In the graphic elicitation diagram there was mention of the organic, emergent aspects of the construction process and this was symbolized by branches with dotted endpoints or leaf like shapes. This was also reflected in the global theme of organic, emergent growth. Within the graphic elicitation diagram the identifiable core of counsellor identity was a theme that incorporated values and self-reflection alongside the enduring elements that defined this identity. These themes were mirrored in the two global themes, guided by values and safeguard identity integrity. The global theme, adaptive shifting had some parallel aspects with two themes in the graphic elicitation diagram, transition points and interconnectedness. The adjustment and decision points that are part of transition when identity is under negotiation were represented in both and in the graphic elicitation diagram diverging branches or lines depicted some of this movement. One global theme that was not specifically identified in the graphic elicitation diagram was sense of agency. There was also a theme in the graphic elicitation diagram that did not appear in the global themes and that was interconnectedness.

The graphic elicitation diagram is more illustrative of the emergent growth and organic dimensions of the identity construction process. It was described by one participant as “fluid, evolving, transforming” and depicted how counsellors were “uniquely travelling [their] own paths.” The graphic elicitation diagram spoke directly to “how elements intertwine and yet remain separate” which was also reflected in the way the five global themes were interrelated but each highlighted a singular aspect of the process. As such, it pointed to and ensured the dynamism of the construction process, the movement of adaptive growth, and the fluidity of professional identity were among the array of themes generated by the graphic elicitation process, all of which were then integrated to inform the super-ordinate global themes of the study findings.

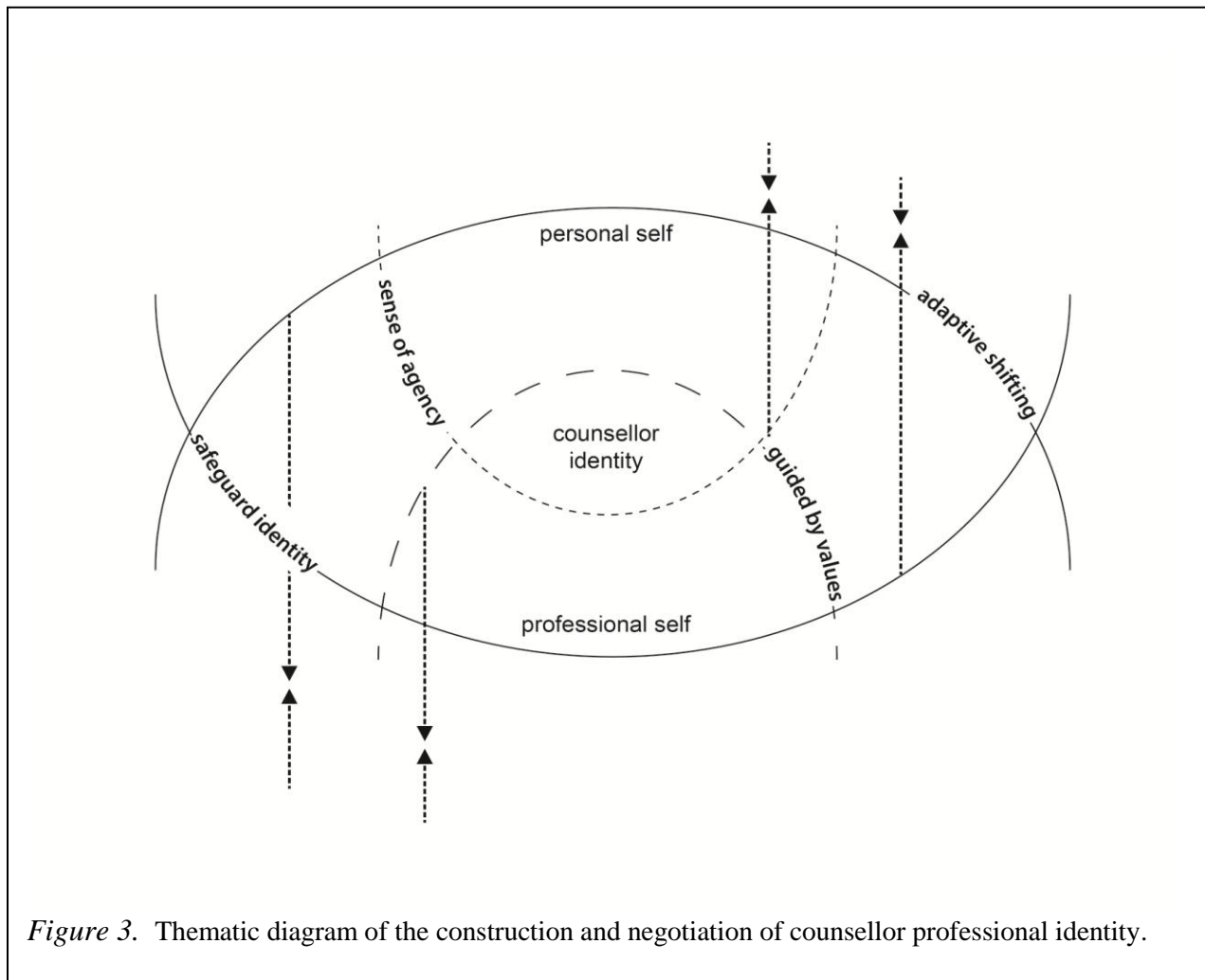
A Thematic Diagram of the Construction and Negotiation of Counsellor Professional Identity

What follows is a thematic diagram that offers another way of understanding how this particular group of counsellors went about the construction and negotiation of their professional identity amid the context of unfolding regulatory changes (Figure 3). It is a visual representation

of how they portrayed and narrated their experience of professional becoming as a dynamic, ongoing process through the positioning and movement of the lines and spaces in the diagram. Counsellor identity is at the centre of the diagram and depicted in this way to illustrate that its essence or core is unique, has edges or boundaries, and exists in relation to the personal and professional self. These two aspects of the self lie just outside of the counsellor identity in the figure and are positioned in this way to show how all three are related and have areas of overlap that are not absolute. This diagram intends to capture the ongoing dynamism of the identity construction process in such a way that it approximates the back and forth movement respondents reported using during their negotiation and navigation. Being a negotiated process that transpires at conscious and unconscious levels, with shifts that are a times imperceptible or profound, and that draws from a variety of tangible or intangible influencing factors, this graphic depiction attempts to approximate what would perhaps be best served by a three-dimensional, animated version (as suggested by a study participant). It was the multi-directional, multi-layered, intertwined, nuanced, and iterative aspects that participants emphasized throughout their identity work narratives which are being drawn out and elucidated in this tentative diagram.

This thematic diagram was established through a bottom-up process and therefore grounded in the words and experiential accounts provided by the participants. Therefore, it draws on the five global themes that respondents identified as central to the professional identity construction process and helps to explain more fully their interrelatedness. These are represented by the four curved lines and the area they enclose. Directional arrows were used to show some of the fluidity and dynamics respondents attributed to this negotiated process.

The two first themes, *sense of agency* and *guided by values* are represented by the two interior curved lines with two-way arrows that weave through the space occupied by the personal self, professional self, and the counsellor identity. The arrows are two directional and have dashed lines to express the motility of agency and values when counsellors are constructing and negotiating transition periods. They are in close proximity to the counsellor identity core because their movement in the view of the participants is more their purview and as the sculptors of their identity, values were stalwartly safeguarded and agency was taken, owned and crafted.



The entire area in the diagram that is enclosed by the two larger curves (which includes the two interior curves, the personal and professional self, as well as the counsellor identity) represents the third theme. This is the *organic, emergent growth* of counsellor ‘becoming’ and is portrayed in this manner to show how it is an iterative force permeating and keeping the identity ‘fluid’ or evolving. The two final themes, *safeguarding identity integrity* and *adaptive shifting* are represented by the two larger curved lines that run through the interior curves, overlap each other at their endpoints, and form the parameter of the diagram. These two curved lines are also in movement as the arrows (and dashed lines) signal and it is the tensions and transition demands of negotiating counsellor identity that are depicted here. This exemplifies the interchange between a willingness to adapt and guarding the essence of counsellor identity that was part of the construction process. The outer lines or tension still

influences the inner entities by their movement as they can contract or expand all of the growth space and entities that lie within that area. All of the structures and spaces in the diagram are constantly fluctuating to represent the dynamism of the identity construction process. Movement in the form of change and transition comes not only from exogenous factors or events but the identity sculptors themselves, the counsellors. Further insights are offered in the discussion chapter that go beyond the design and mechanics of the diagram by providing a more nuanced understanding of the interactive dynamics of the five themes.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the results from the thematic analysis of the various data sources. The first of three sections reported findings from the within case analysis looking first at individual participant accounts and then the virtual focus group for emergent themes. The major findings from this analysis indicated that counsellor professional identity was continually under negotiation as multiple challenges (e.g., life events, workplace demands, and professional regulation) frequently created periods of uncertainty. Counsellors viewed their identity construction process as a lifelong endeavour that was facilitated by external factors (e.g., mentors, peer validation, a sense of belonging with their profession) and shaped through their sense of agency which was realized through building skills, self-reflection, actualizing their life purpose, and optimizing resources. At the heart of the identity construction process was a desire to help others and ensure there was congruence between their personal and professional self-images as they pursued the counsellor career path. Navigating their counsellor identity required not only ongoing shaping and negotiation; it also meant communicating to others how it was distinct, multi-layered, and adaptive. For many, there was some history of sensing an inherent connection with the counsellor identity and whether through some serendipitous meeting or moment along their life/career path most had found (or recognized) a goodness of fit with this profession.

The next section offered themes from the between case analysis which had been guided by three perspectives: counsellor experience level, practice setting, and the role of specialized practice/training. From this level of the analysis the findings showed how competence, autonomy, self-doubt, and validation can fortify or weaken the identity strength of counsellors at multiple junctures during the identity construction process. Counsellor identity was characterized and influenced at times by the particular setting (e.g., rural, community non-profit)

where individuals practiced or temperament of the work environment (e.g., holistic, medicalized) adding another layer of complexity to their identity work. In some instances, having specialization (e.g., career, addiction) as a counsellor also compounded the construction of professional identity by requiring a prioritization of identities.

The third section looked across the case for global themes offered by participants in relation to the research questions and issues. This higher level of analysis and abstraction brought about the identification of five main findings. Respondents constructed and negotiated their professional identity by assuming a sense of agency for the task while being guided by their values. Both of these elements were integral to their identity work and the fluidity of this process was facilitated by two other factors. Counsellors navigated their identity construction which was iterative and evolving in two ways. First through a willingness to be adaptive in the face of change and secondly, by remaining diligent about safeguarding the integrity of their professional identity. This entire process was premised on the ebb and flow of emergent growth that respondents associated with becoming a professional rather than achieving or concluding some fixed state. In order to deepen understanding, a thematic diagram was used to demonstrate the interconnectedness of these global themes and visually capture this adaptive shifting. Finally, the graphic elicitation diagram offered another level of insight and explored new or existing themes by virtue of its process (i.e., iterative, collaboratively constructed, triangulated).

Chapter 5: Discussion

The intention of this study was to understand counsellor professional identity construction during an exogenous change event looking specifically at how counsellors negotiated their professional identity amid changes to the remit of their profession. A further objective was to establish what counsellors drew upon to construct, rework or maintain their professional identity during such a change event. The plan was to comprehend how they reconciled identity discrepancies if any, and how they managed the uncertainty accompanying this period of transition. Through this endeavour, the hope was to gain some appreciation for how counsellors portrayed and narrated this experience of professional becoming.

The results showed that counsellors employ a variety of identity negotiation strategies during periods of uncertainty and transition especially when faced with a significant exogenous change event which in this case involved an unprecedented mode of professional regulation (i.e., through a psychotherapy college) and the chance to study it as it was unfolding. From the experiential accounts shared by this group of counsellors there were some specific opportunities, mechanisms and resources that facilitated their identity construction process. Findings also highlighted an interesting dimension which is how meaning, values, and agency can galvanize identity work and in turn this contributed some helpful suggestions about the dynamics of this active, nuanced, and uneven process. The study also adds to the conceptualization of counsellor professional identity as an iterative unfolding that moves along a life-career trajectory with respondents portraying and defining this path of professional becoming.

The discussion of the findings from this study and how these add to or align with previous understandings of counsellor professional identity construction will be offered. Following this, some additional insights and understanding will be proffered using the thematic diagram. Each of the five thematic elements of the diagram and their interrelatedness will be examined with reference to findings from this study and what has been discussed in previous research. Using the thematic diagram to demonstrate the interactive nature of the identity negotiation process, two participant examples (one focus group member and one interview participant) will then be presented to highlight the complexity, depth, and fluidity of a particular moment in their ongoing identity work. The study's limitations will be outlined prior to a discussion of the implications for counsellors, education and training, the profession, and future

research that became apparent from the findings. The chapter will conclude with a statement of the contributions to knowledge offered by this study.

Strategies for Negotiating Identity during Uncertainty and Transition

The findings suggest that uncertainty surrounding the unfolding of provincial regulations and steps associated with this process (e.g., registration requirements, controlled titles, restrictions to acts and remits of authority, pending proclamation of the Ontario Psychotherapy Act (2007) and opening of the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO), academic and training prerequisites, and so on) caused concern and brought with them diverse levels and sources of tension for student, novice, and experienced counsellors as they went about the construction of their professional identity. Overall, counsellors believed their professional identity was an evolving, negotiated identity with inevitable periods of both transformative and unsettling transition similar to when they went from a student to novice or counsellor to counselling supervisor. Some of these transitional demands involving task variability, shifting role expectations, or doubts about competency that bring development related uncertainties for new and experienced counsellors as documented in the counselling literature were further substantiated (Bruss & Kopala, 1993; Howard et al., 2006; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). For example, the negotiation of tensions associated with prioritizing and managing multiple identities (e.g., identity associated with specialization over general counsellor identity) (Brott & Myers, 1999; Cashwell et al., 2009; Pistole & Roberts, 2002) was raised by the study participants. Ongoing efforts to bring integration and congruence to the personal and professional self were also reported within the experiences of this group of counsellors lending support to previous findings on their role in identity negotiation (Auxier et al., 2003; Gibson et al., 2010).

Previous studies of counsellor professional identity formation and development (Loganbill et al., 1982; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Stoltenberg, 1981) have not fully captured the dynamic aspects of actual identity construction during a period of profound uncertainty where exogenous factors have the potential for micro (individual) and macro (profession) level repercussions due in part to the infrequency or rarity of this kind of event. However, participants in this study experienced this kind of identity uncertainty during a shift in the regulatory landscape which was not only unprecedented but created a suspended transitional period where the status of current and future identities remained ambiguous (Ashforth 2001; Ibarra, 2007;

Turner, 1982). The results included a variety of response from counsellors, some of which included frustrations that counsellor identity would be marginalized and exasperation over, as one participant expressed, the “moving goal posts” that emphasized never ending deficiencies. Others expressed feelings of indecision about continuing on this career path while some worried about being rebranded and having the flexibility of practice removed or limited. In some cases there was a sense of loss for the counsellor title because of a deep identification and its ease of recognition for clients. While one respondent assumed a passive trust while waiting on the sidelines till further notice, another delivered an enthusiastic endorsement for whatever status or financial gains may be gleaned by regulation.

Looking outside of the counselling literature for some comparatives, these findings resonate with what has been noted in organizational contexts when professionals are faced with major change events (e.g., mergers, downsizing, hybridization of professions) that threaten an existing identity and sometimes compound the situation when tentative or provisional identities prevail during an indeterminate transitional period (Chreim, 2002; Clark et al., 2010; McGivern, Currie, Ferlie, Fitzgerald, & Waring, 2015). The respondents negotiated the identity dissonance which was both evolving and anticipatory in nature using “compartmentalization” (keeping counsellor identity and adding on but not synergizing with the psychotherapist identity) and “aggregation” (being creative and finding links between each valued identity like career and personal counsellor identities) which resonated with previous research findings on how individuals manage multi-layered identities (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). However, the results did not conclusively confirm the implementation of “provisional identities” (Ibarra, 1999), “dis-identification” or a complete identity deletion (Chreim, 2002; Kreiner et al., 2006) as found in other studies of identity negotiation perhaps due to the protracted pace of regulation change during this study. However, some respondents did express fears looking forward that if tensions brought by this change event became exceptionally challenging they may be compelled to abandon their counsellor identity despite holding strong convictions this was a vocation, a way to actualize their life purpose, and inextricably woven to deeply held personal values.

Two interesting findings did emerge related to the negotiation of identity tensions by counsellors in this study. The tensions arising from the necessity to defend counsellor identity against a creeping impingement or marginalization by new regulatory frameworks was viewed as a negative but empowering element that could become a consolidating force to activate an

impassioned response, increase commitment, and prevent erasure of a valued identity. It was in “bumping up against” this perceived threat to the counsellor identity and values that necessitated a “push back” and some respondents expressed this using visual symbols (e.g., placards to voice resistance) which they captured in their participant diagram, another expressed growing more vocal or “militant” now when identity violations surfaced, or in the declarations by another who refused to be “pigeon-holed” by a temporary, inadequate title as regulation parameters were established. These findings have implications for existing research on uncertainty reduction and entitativity by allowing the experiences of a unique social group (i.e., counsellors) to further substantiate how prolonged and unresolved identity uncertainty can harden or intensify convictions. Perhaps not extreme enough to “tighten the iron grip of ideology and spawn orthodoxy” (Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007, p. 141) as found in studies of other social groups, the influence of prolonged identity uncertainty warrants notice and further investigation as it relates to counsellors.

This use of some form of covert resistance in the face of identity impingement or violations by this group of respondents also corresponds with discussions in the counselling literature on defending counsellor identity against the threat of regulation by taking a stance of “principled non-compliance” (i.e., being informed but strategically non-cooperative) (House, 2008). It was in defence of humanistic values as the vital distinguishing feature of counsellor identity that House (2008) as well as McLaughlin and Boettcher (2009) petitioned counsellors to “retain their original radicalism and the integrity of our bold humanistic vision within a state-institutionalised and professionalised therapy field” (House, 2008, p. 47) through an unyielding “unity of purpose and politics” (McLaughlin & Boettcher, 2009, p. 140). Results from this study clearly demonstrated, as will be discussed in a subsequent section, counsellor push back and assuming a militant stance became strongest and tactical when identity violations infringed on deeply held values.

Noticeably similar was a second finding that outlined another somewhat subversive strategy used by the respondents to negotiate their professional identity and deal with tensions. This approach involved small acts of resistance described by counsellors as “wearing” the prescribed title and playing the part but not ‘becoming’ the prospective identity which was about something much deeper and beyond settling the disparity between following required designations (e.g., regulations dictating what appears on the business card or website) and giving

partiality to counsellor identity during client interactions. These findings are quite similar to the “deep identification” described by Ashforth et al. (2008) that is existentially grounded as opposed to a “situational identification” where the objective is to establish a position in some social group (e.g., organization, occupation, profession) understanding that the first relates to a durable self-concept while the latter is changeable by nature (p. 331). A deep connection with the counsellor identity according to some respondents persisted and appears to have helped them transcend some of the disruptive tensions and inconsistencies in the current context.

The variety of responses by respondents to the uncertainty surrounding the unfolding of provincial regulations and steps associated with this process which has just been outlined shows the relevance of this particular context for the professional identity work of counsellors. It is a considered element in the negotiated process that participants identified in varying degrees but because this study set out to understand the process and not to measure outcomes or impact per se, quantification of this must be left to future research.

Facilitators of Identity Construction

Counsellors utilized a number of mechanisms, actively pursued certain approaches, capitalized on unforeseen opportunities and drew upon different resources to help them shape, navigate, and construct their professional identity. One resource that augmented the construction process for a majority of the respondents was frequent validation and nurturing of their professional identity by clinical supervisors, counselling peers in their workplace, allied health professionals encountered in different settings, and counsellor educators or training facilitators. Having access to communities and networks where counsellor identity was supported and valued also enhanced their identity work. For some, different work settings and roles had influenced their identity construction but as they explained, often the growth of their professional identity came through the relational bonds with clients, the level of engagement with practice communities and at times their internal sense of identity irrespective of the current setting.

Counsellors cited opportunities for shaping and refining their professional identity that arose at times in their practicum or internship placements, at professional conferences, while working in counselling centres for a specific client population, and during the process of building contacts with their tribe (i.e., members of their counselling specialization). When these supportive mechanisms were not optimal and more negative it “shook the foundations” of their

identity and for one respondent it was “a very rough road because it was almost like starting my construction of my identity from scratch.” These findings are fairly consistent with what has been discussed within the context of counsellor development and professional socialization as elements or factors that contribute to counsellor identity formation (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009; Calley & Hawley, 2008; Choate, Smith, & Spruill, 2005; Gazzola et al., 2011; Nelson & Jackson, 2003).

Identity construction like identity work involves a certain level of active shaping by individuals and not merely being passive recipients of incoming influences (Kreiner et al., 2006). Findings indicated that this particular group of counsellors were quite agential and took ownership for the production and evolution of their professional identity in many contexts, relational interactions, and situations (e.g., contributing to professional journals, extending their professional reach to support community needs, providing mentorship through communities of practice, speaking at conferences, developing and distributing counselling materials, seeking out additional skills or training, taking leadership roles in professional associations). Professional involvement in these kinds of activities as a means of advancing counsellor identity is often encouraged within the counselling literature (Gale & Austin, 2003; Puglia, 2008) and what this study adds is a demonstrable, articulated incidence of counsellors actively engaging in this aspect of their identity work.

Mentorship experiences and the support systems provided by role models was another resource counsellors drew upon while navigating the construction of their professional identity. For some this involved actively seeking direction from their professional peers (e.g., internship supervisors, more experienced counsellors, academic advisors, counselling instructors, counsellors with specialized training) who could guide them along when circumstances and tensions were pulling them off track or introduce ways to expand aspects of their counsellor identity they may have overlooked. Mentorship and supportive professional relationships that continue throughout the life-career of counsellors have been broadly viewed as an important component for establishing a sound professional identity (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004; Gazzola et al., 2011; Luke & Goodrich, 2010). This finding was confirmed by respondents in this study who felt mentors were instrumental resources during the construction of their professional identity at multiple points.

An interesting adjunct finding was how these key counselling professionals sometimes precipitated or were at the centre of happenstance events and serendipitous moments that accelerated the construction of their professional identity. In one case it was through the loan of a book by a counselling peer that powerfully shaped one individual's counsellor identity through this "life changing moment" and another had a similar incident where direction on their counsellor identity was messaged through a book surfacing over a series of fortuitous instances and finally in a meeting with a counsellor who inspired them to pursue a specialized area of practice. Critical incidents and turning points have certainly been explored within the counselling literature, and assertions relating these to professional identity development investigated (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Howard et al., 2006) but what was unique about findings from this study was the pervasive, compelling, and intriguing nature of those recounted by respondents. Some of the happenstance occurrences and serendipitous moments also transpired when counsellors were away from counselling peers or professional settings, lost in moments of self-reflection. Signs and chance alignments of even benign objects became more than just directional arrows to a counsellor career path. For some respondents these moments crystallized a latent sense of calling which merged with their counsellor identity bringing them unmistakable clarity.

Portraying and Defining the Path to Professional Becoming

The construction of counsellor identity was viewed as a lifelong undertaking, or project, interspersed with episodes of personal and professional growth involving what respondents described as a perpetual "weaving," "sculpting," and reworking of identity layers. Counsellor identity was considered multi-faceted and the ability to increase this dimensionality was a distinguishing attribute noticed and named by one respondent who referred to counsellors as "bridge people." The idea of counsellor identity having an ostensible core or essence that could be pivoted around or augmented as new layers of experience and skills accrued was associated with a strong sense of agency for personalizing and shaping identity as a counsellor. Far from being a seamless process, one respondent recounted how the addition and subsequent reconciliation of a new identity layer had actually undermined their counsellor identity much to their consternation. Communicating counsellor professional identity within the context of a specialization was also not clear cut, as often it required an extra level of advocacy creating

undue stress on both identities (e.g., career and personal counselling). Having to put aside or re-prioritize existing identities in lieu of changing designations and restrictions necessitated by the upcoming regulation of psychotherapy was another challenge respondents faced in their ongoing efforts to communicate their counsellor identity.

Thoughts and concerns about how the designated title(s) proposed by the regulatory college, specifically the use of psychotherapist over counsellor and how it did or did not resonate or portray their professional self, varied considerably. While some struggled to make sense of the implications for practice and sense of uncertainty around retaining their counsellor designation others seemed indifferent or nonplused, feeling their internal sense of being a counsellor was far more enduring than external designators or titles which fell to outside influences. Some worried about the connotation of psychopathology that accompanied the title of psychotherapist. They saw it as quite incongruent with the ethical, philosophical, and theoretical premises of their counsellor identity. In fact, they worried it could create disharmony not only for their internal sense of identity but interfere with therapeutic rapport and client rapprochement. They felt quite strongly about authentically portraying the caring, approachable, and compassionate way of being with clients that was described as holistic, client-centred, and had “almost like a spiritual component” inherent to their counsellor identity. It was feared adopting the designation of psychotherapist would result in an erroneous depiction or see them working in “bad faith” while having to reconcile this internal dissonance (Sartre, 1956).

Problems associated with an ill-defined counsellor identity have been found to have a negative impact on counsellor functioning and professional confidence (Blocher, Tennyson, & Johnson, 1963; Brott & Myers, 1999; Schoen, 1989) so it would not seem unreasonable that adopting or working under ill-matched designations or titles could pose some similar problems. The issue of imprecise titles and designations is in some ways part of a larger concern around adopting or trying to integrate philosophical or theoretical perspectives antithetical to counsellor values (i.e., illness or disease models, remedial treatments, psychiatric approach) which are seen as a threat to the unique and valued tenets (i.e., growth, self-actualization) at the heart of counsellor identity (Dollarhide & Oliver, 2014; Hansen et al., 2014; McWilliams, 2005). The psychotherapist identity that accompanied the designation was seen by respondents as offering a fragmented portrayal of who they were as counsellors and based on their responses the priority

rested on upholding their enduring “counsellor-ness,” their way of being that needed to be conveyed to clients and other professionals.

Certainly some expressed this need for an accurate, resonant portrayal of their counsellor identity more openly and with sharper clarity but interestingly this desire to safeguard the meaning and values base at the centre of their identity surfaced in the metaphors and diagramming like a thread woven throughout their lifelong identity work. Individuals going through identity transitions during career loss or redirection, experience periods of liminality caused by breaks or threats to their identity which they describe as “a time of confusion, insecurity and uncertainty” and often “they feel they have lost the narrative thread of their life” (Ibarra, 2007, p. 6). Respondents in this study appeared to be responding in varying degrees to the potential re-direction, re-constitution, or marginalization of their counsellor identity based on what they had been told or gleaned from intermittent bulletins about the evolving regulatory changes and by using or entertaining various identity preservation strategies covert or overt in nature as previously discussed.

Another approach that many spoke about in connection to portraying and defining their counsellor identity within the current circumstances and at other intervals during their professional journey involved viewing their identity construction as a lifelong process. Some respondents described this as an emergent, fluid process that was far from linear with unexpected fluctuations and periods of growth, stagnation, and crystallization. Counsellors in this case study contributed a valuable piece of knowledge about their unique identity that was passed on through an eloquent metaphor shared by one respondent of “green clay.” Professional identity as they described it was an emergent, iterative becoming, something that is “malleable . . . you grapple with it . . . it is always ready to be dismantled, kind of working it but knowing the surface, knowing what you can do with it . . . it dries out . . . you have to kind of moisten it . . . but the fires in the kiln, the external factors . . . the clay body and the glazes cannot mix and it can just shatter.” In fact, there was a general sense that the identity portrait was something perpetually being crafted, in constant evolution, with cycles of refinement and described by some as either “nebulous” or “amorphous.” This iterative, emergent aspect was apparent in the themes, images and symbols captured in the participant diagrams and metaphors such as: a winding path, twists and turns on a journey, rings of growth in a tree, sculpting of clay, planes of existence, networks

or branches emanating from a hub or core, finding an opening in the woods, and the making of wine.

This portrayal of counsellor identity as something evolving or in the process of becoming with continuous cycles of shaping, and only momentarily is there a sense of mastery, was how respondents described their construction process. This is not a prevalent notion or customary frame used to understand how counsellors construct and convey their professional identity, however within the sociology and organizational management field there has been a significant body of literature exploring this idea of professional becoming (Scanlon, 2011; Schutz, 1964; Wenger, 1998). This frame casts the professional, in this case the counsellor, within a post-modern context where “practitioners develop individual strategies for overcoming crises and prefer to sort out unsettledness for themselves” through restructuring, reflexivity and continually adapting as the practice environment evolves (Scanlon, 2011, p. 27). The professional identity is always being constructed, caught up in a dynamic interplay of negotiation and adaptation depicted by Wenger (1998) as a “learning trajectory” (as cited in Scanlon, 2011, p. 49). Not only do many aspects of this notion resonate with how the respondents approached the construction and shaping of their counsellor identity but it also presents a way of (re)framing their response to the unpredictability, tensions and challenges of this identity transition period as highly adaptive or protean. Lifton (1993) defines the “protean self” as “surprisingly resilient” in the face of uncertainties and confusion that can loosen known “moorings” but the individual “makes use of bits and pieces here and there and somehow keeps going” (p. 1). The unevenness caused by social, economic and political changes precipitates fragmentation but the protean self has “a capacity for bringing together disparate and seemingly incompatible elements of identity and involvement in what I [Lifton] call ‘odd combinations’, and for continuous transformation of these elements” (Lifton, 1993, p. 5). Taken from this perspective, respondents may be making use of the discontinuity or ebb and flow of professional becoming in a unique way that capitalizes on exogenous change to facilitate their identity construction and not in spite of it. In other words, it is a creative catalyst rather than a roadblock that needs circumventing.

Meaning, Values, and Agency Galvanize Identity Work

There was a significant focus and consistency by respondents on the importance of finding meaning, conferring purpose, realizing strongly held values, and having a sense of

agency as a way to galvanize, fire up and spur on their identity work especially during times of uncertainty or at transition points. Connecting themselves to the meaning and purpose that fuelled their drive to become a “carer,” that for some was a hard won circuitous journey, was the catalyst for pursuing the counsellor identity and what sustained its ongoing construction during challenging times. Finding meaning through helping others was rewarding, a valued part of their counsellor identity, and something that required definite vigilance to ward off burnout or compassion fatigue. Growing and sustaining their professional identity was often compounded by factors that challenged their identity strength or drew them into periods of existential reflection about not being valued, recurrent self-doubt, employment roadblocks, and “feeling victimized” by the unknowns surrounding pending regulatory legislation. The turbulence that punctuated their identity work was countered according to respondents by being able to fulfill their strong yearning to help others and actualize their life purpose, personal values, and altruistic intentions through their work as a counsellor. Speaking more extensively on how meaning and purpose seeking animated their identity work, some respondents stated they felt guided or called to be a counsellor recounting compelling moments of certitude and relief having finally arrived at their vocation. This finding adds to previous evidence that highlighted how altruistic values and a desire to help others played a significant role in motivating the identity work of masters-level Canadian counsellors (Gazzola & Smith, 2007; Gazzola et al., 2010).

Infusing meaning and actualizing life purpose were just two means counsellors reported using to maintain and navigate their identity work. Being in a state of uncertainty now, and for some quite often at points along the trajectory leading them to become counsellors, respondents had activated an array of sense making actions to help them reconcile ambiguity and sustain their professional identity during transitions. Appealing to the common identity and shared values of counsellors, the respondents had often benefited from degrees of affinity and a sense of belonging or fellowship with those who understood what it was to be a counsellor. Consistent with other studies, being able to draw upon the meaning and values shared by fellow counsellors to sustain and invigorate the identity work being done at the individual level while in the workplace, at conferences, or through professional associations was quite important to these respondents (Alves & Gazzola, 2011; Calley & Hawley, 2008).

Sense making also occurred through internal dialogues and periods of self-reflection that one respondent referred to as “inward moving communication” which many saw as essential for

maintaining their identity integrity. Nurturing their self-definition and staying connected to what some described as an innate or inherent connection with being a counsellor that originated in childhood, adolescence, or during academic pursuits leading in a different direction gave them a means to buffer threats to their growing professional identity. Connecting to a sense of meaning and nurturing their identity involved an internal, reflective process (i.e., journaling, personal reflection, self review) but of particular note was the appreciation expressed by participants at the close of the interviews and virtual focus group in having had their identity work story requested and heard. It seemed the meaning making was essential for fuelling and sustaining the identity work as outlined by respondents but having this acknowledged and valued by others (i.e., the researcher and other focus group members) in the moment and in this manner was: a pleasant and surprising offshoot for a few, reminiscent for one person having met a formal request of their career story some time ago, an idea broker for another pondering the nexus of their inward and outward moving communication, and support for the premise that identity work never stops (Giddens, 1991; Watson, 2008).

A number of important themes emerged from the findings to increase understanding about the dynamics of identity work and what counsellors drew upon to mobilize the construction of their professional self. One of the salient themes highlighted by respondents was the role personal and professional values played in their identity building process. As noted in the identity literature, values and beliefs contribute to the “stable and enduring constellation” of elements that define professional identity (Ibarra, 1999, p. 765) as do experiences or purpose seeking motives. The integration and transmission of values from the personal to the professional identity and vice versa has also been a key understanding underpinning the development process (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003) and factors responsible for shaping counsellor identity (Alves & Gazzola, 2011; Bruss & Kopala, 1993; Reisetter et al., 2004).

In the literature on organizational and professional identity construction this attention to the congruency of values, where the personal and professional values are resonant, can at time lead to identification through affinity (Pratt, 1998). Dutton et al. (1994) describe this kind of identification transpiring when individuals believe the values and beliefs held within their personal identity or self-concept are also apparent and supported within the professional or organizational identity. Findings from this study lend further support to some of these understandings about the centrality of values in identity work and to the overall process of

becoming a professional. For instance, respondents spoke about a number of personal values that guided their identity work during moments of self-reflection on what it meant to be a counsellor (e.g., caring, hope, empathy, spiritual) and subsequently influenced how they acted or embodied this identity during interactions with clients (e.g., welcoming, altruism, unconditional positive regard, confidentiality, wellbeing). “Aesthetic coherence” by virtue of affirming personal and professional values was identified by some as a prerequisite dimension of their identity work. This meant ensuring there was ethical and philosophical alignment through cultivating important values by choosing theories, practices, and ways of being with clients that felt resonant, “very significant and honouring,” and “almost transcendent” for some counsellors. The search and arrival at this point of values congruence was expressed as having found “a good fit” or “being on the right path” when everything “fell into place” like puzzle pieces or had “a lock and key fit.”

These findings add to the existing research by affording a clear, nuanced view of how intangible elements like values, beliefs and meaning-making galvanize the construction of professional identity and how, when, and why counsellors intentionally draw upon these during this process. Previous research had identified the integration of personal and professional identity as a contributing or influencing factor in professional identity development among several other tangible factors (work experience, roles, self-directed learning, place of work, ongoing professional development, professional membership) but had not fully explored the deeper intangible forces that animate the actual construction process for counsellors across all experience levels, in multiple settings, and in specialized practice contexts (Alves & Gazzola, 2011).

Achieving harmony, between personal values and those often associated (Hansen et al., 2014) with being a professional counsellor or with the profession (i.e., humanistic, existential, social justice, multicultural), was considered by most to be a crucial force bolstering their identity work. As mentioned, some highlighted how they had intentionally orchestrated their workspace to message these through the use of ambient lighting, the placement/selection of furnishings, inclusion of inspirational posters, displays of credentials, and a cautious selection of personal items. There were some additional implications related to these findings beyond those already presented which bear mentioning here because they demonstrate the depth of agency and value seeking that took place during some counsellor’s identity work. For instance, even when

this was a temporary internship setting, this process of purposefully messaging personal and professional values in the counselling space took place to ensure clients and professional colleagues understood what this counsellor stood for and stood by at this early stage in their identity construction. Another particularly interesting finding in this study was that a strongly held personal value and its corresponding counsellor value as messaged through artefacts and workplace decor would be given precedence (often in a covert or subtle way) over generic, institutional ones. This was evidenced in the following manner. Being a warm, caring person who identified with the welcoming, approachable, non-threatening value system of being a counsellor (i.e., being non-judgemental, empathic, supportive), this counsellor reported placing neutral, soft furnishings on their impersonal, institutional issued seating to correct or “refine” the value messaging. Others in similar settings used very small items (e.g., a carefully chosen figurine) or placements of furniture (e.g., how the chairs were angled) with a similar intention while a few who were in private practice designed their space using texture, colour, lighting, and artwork to communicate their values to clients and to remind themselves.

These detailed experiential accounts showing the use of intentional “customization” (Pratt et al., 2006) and identity work “tactics” (Kreiner et al., 2006) by counsellors lends further support to the belief that individuals are not merely passive recipients but agential, authoring, adaptive constructors that “accept, deny, react, reshape, rethink, acquiesce, rebel, conform, and define and redefine the demands and responses” throughout their identity work (Kreiner et al., 2006, p. 1042). These findings about counsellor identity work find ground within the organizational and management research (Ashforth, 2001; Dickie, 2003; Ibarra, 1999; Kreiner et al., 2006; Pratt & Foreman, 2000; Pratt et al., 2006; Van Maanen, 1997) that has begun to address the interactive dynamics of how professionals (working in organizations such as hospitals, corporate settings, private enterprise) construct their own identities. Investigation of these processual dimensions of counsellor professional identity construction have been indirectly implied or touched upon within the counsellor development literature but not to the degree these experiential accounts have fortuitously provided.

Not only through their actions but also in their declarations, counsellors considered themselves the agents, owners and primary constructors of their counsellor identity during the process of becoming professionals. Most were quite emphatic the design and choices were theirs to make whether this involved aligning themselves with a certain theoretical perspective, a

counselling specialization, a particular practice community or client population, developing an area of expertise and taking the necessary training, adding another layer to their identity as an internship supervisor, continually updating and adding new areas of knowledge through personal or academic scholarship activities, and ongoing personal work to better understand how life events or experiences impact their identity as a counsellor. Some reported feeling it was a “roller coaster ride” at times while others felt they could weather the inevitabilities of change, uncertainty, or transformative growth provided they had agency.

Referring to the Jungian query about “who is in the driver’s seat?” one respondent declared, “I am in the driver’s seat” to emphasize their strong stance on taking ownership for their identity work. Assuming authorship of and being the main actor in their identity story was fraught with personal challenges, economic hardships, trepidations over professional competence, burnout, and even conflicting ambitions along the journey of becoming a professional counsellor but it was their fortitude and steadfast resolve to be agential that drove their identity work. Findings point to the important role individual agency had in the identity work of this group of counsellors that in spite of or quite aside from the exogenous change event (unfolding of professional regulations) and its attendant tensions or air of uncertainty for the most part they still viewed the process as theirs. Not having “discretion over the parameters of work” during “upending” transitions can lead to heightened adaptation, proactive behaviour, passive conformity, and other sense making responses (Ashforth, 2001, p. 68). The predominant responses by counsellors in this study were proactive, considered, adaptive, self-assured, entrepreneurial, passionate, and contained small acts of resistance or covert moves. Although the full implications of the regulation changes were not known at the time by these participants, some assumed a watchful stance (e.g., regularly checking updates online or through their professional association) but none took a stance of passive conformity.

Insights from the Thematic Diagram

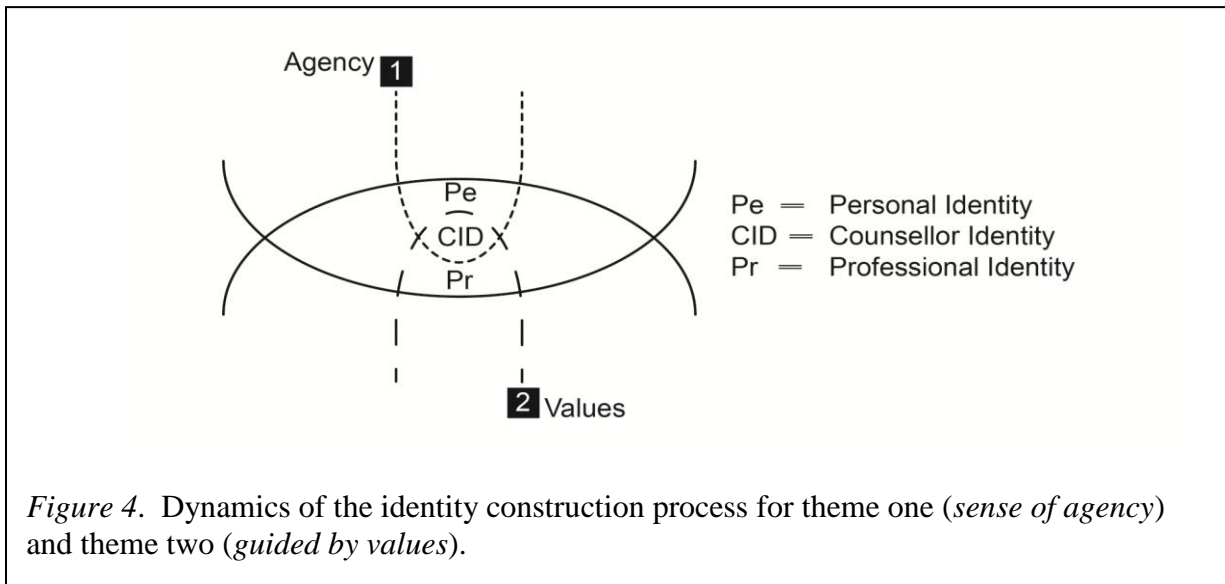
A thematic diagram grounded in the words and experiential accounts of the participants and emerging through this bottom-up process allowed the interrelatedness of the five global themes and the dynamics of the construction process (i.e., movement, variability, intensity) to be more clearly understood. Again these five global themes were: (a) sense of agency, (b) guided by values, (c) safeguarding identity integrity, (d) adaptive shifting, and (e) organic, emergent

growth. There is an ebb and flow to the interactive dynamics typified in this very fluid, constantly shifting diagram that matches what was described throughout the experiential accounts of participants to explain how their construction process worked. Not an inert process, it was alive and vividly described as a growing, emergent, weaving, agential, malleable, nuanced, transformative, and sometimes tension ridden route. The thematic diagram offers another way to understand this unique negotiated process and visualize the interactive dynamics employed by this group of counsellors. As outlined in the literature review, few process models exist that capture the actual dynamics of identity construction (Ashforth et al., 2008; Kreiner et al., 2006). As such, this discussion of the findings has drawn out some of the empirical findings in previous studies that featured particular elements (e.g., provisional identity, identicide) or processes (e.g., customization, emulation) within their identity construction models to support or challenge the formation and working of this thematic diagram.

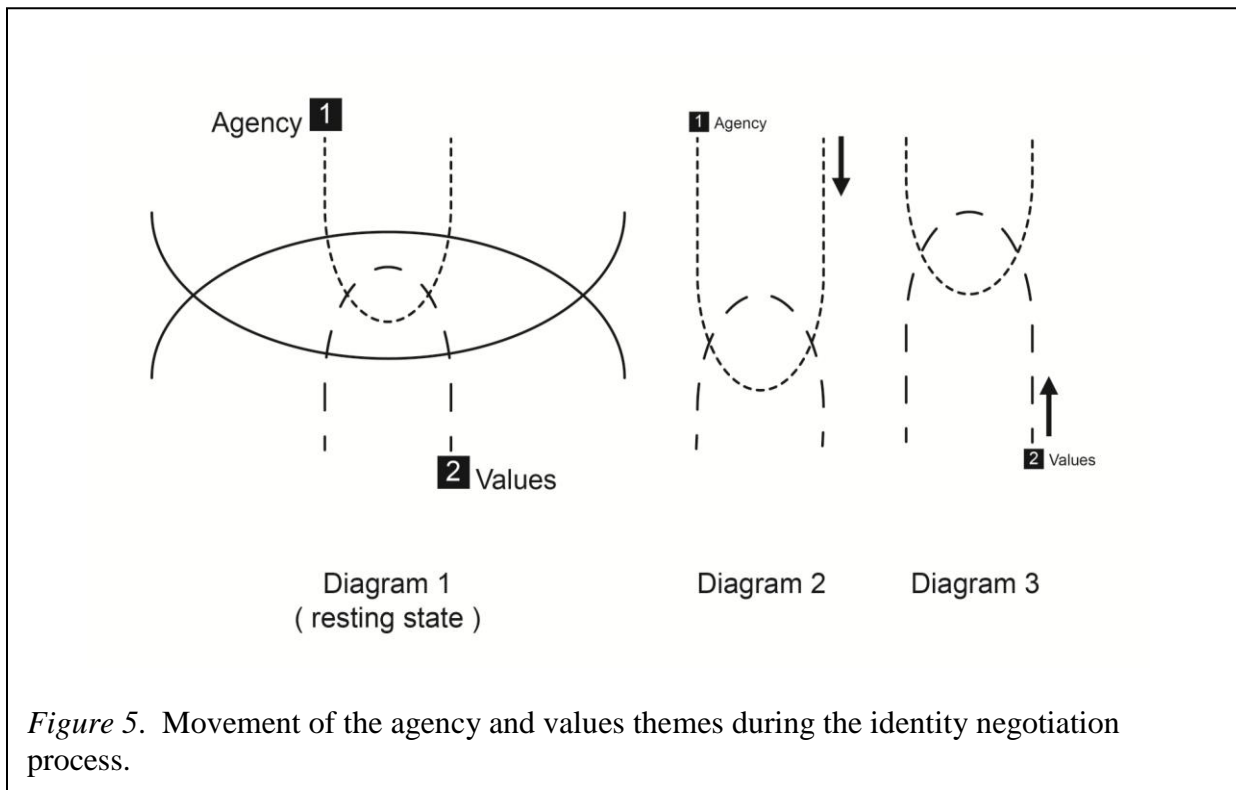
An explanation of how each of the five themes interacted and contributed to the overall process depicted in the thematic diagram is outlined in a series of diagrams. This provides a sense of each of the part of the thematic diagram and shows the flow of their association along with supportive evidence from the interview and virtual focus group findings (i.e., verbatim quotes and identity negotiation moments reported by respondents). To enhance the understanding of the thematic diagram even further, a more detailed demonstration of the interactive dynamics of the model across all five dimensions will be offered featuring the identity “negotiation moments” of two study participants (one interview participant and the other a focus group member). The shaping and negotiation process as described by the study participants was an iterative, fluctuating compilation of multiple instances of identity work that punctuated the entire trajectory of becoming a professional so referring to them as “negotiation moments” captures the amorphous, nebulous qualities they attributed to them.

Theme One and Two: Sense of Agency and Guided by Values

There are two u-shaped curves in the center of the thematic diagram, the one curving upward represents the agency theme and the one curving downward depicts the values theme (Figure 4).



The agency curve represents the power or self-determination feature of the identity construction process and the values curve depicts the meaning or purpose driven aspects of this process. The dynamism of the identity work of counsellors during their construction process is exemplified first in the fluidity of these two central themes which will be explained using a series of diagrams (Figure 5).



The first diagram shows the interaction of the themes at their most imperceptible level (e.g., unconscious identity processing, negligible movement) and the three interrelated identities that is, the personal self, counsellor identity, and professional self. Ashforth et al. (2008) refers to this as “offline processing and stability” (p. 340) and in diagram one this is captured with the values curve and the agency curve appearing stationary but in fact actively, but very subtly engaged. Diagram two depicts the movement of the agency curve and diagram three the shifting of the values curve. Each of these diagrams show the movement during the normal ebb and flow of ongoing identity construction as all three identities are continually being shaped and guided by the counsellor. When the counsellor engages in the construction process (i.e., professional becoming) they take ownership for the modification or expansion of their counsellor identity (agency curve moves toward the professional self) and the boundaries each of the three identities shifts accordingly (diagram two). This may be an incremental, temporal and situation specific refinement, hence the moving arrows in the diagram. Some participant examples of this agential movement included the intentional shaping of professional identity premised on a theoretical awakening by one person, another it was a focused selection of identity congruent skills and their acquisition, and the use of a challenging mentorship experience as time for self-reflection on their professional identity path.

During the construction process, values and meaning making are part of the identity shaping done by counsellors and all three levels again are subject to a degree of movement. For instance, as counsellors incorporate the values of their profession or integrate new ones (e.g., humanistic, constructivist, medical determinism) (Dollarhide & Oliver, 2014) there is a reassessment and modified integration of the values underpinning all three identities (the values curve moves toward the personal self as shown in diagram three) that again may be modest or robust depending on the change source (i.e., self-reflection, new scope of practice, workplace values). Some examples from the participants where values and meaning making came under negotiation were: a novice counsellor feeling a solid foundation of core values spoke about the reality of having to “mold and adapt” their professional identity daily as they navigated problems or issues of practice and situations that arose in their client work; for another participant working out their counsellor identity in a workplace with values antithetical to both their professional and personal self involved a concerted effort to adjust but eventuated in a decision to seek a new more values congruent workplace.

These three diagrams depict moderate level fluctuations that could occur as the three identities are negotiated and reintegrated in response to change factors both of an internal and external nature. There may be rare instances when the intensity and enormity of a change factor could disrupt the fluidity of counsellor identity construction bringing about an extreme fluctuation (brief or lasting). Diagrams four and five depict what each of these outcomes would look like on just the values dimension (curve moves down in diagram four and up severely in diagram five) (Figure 6).

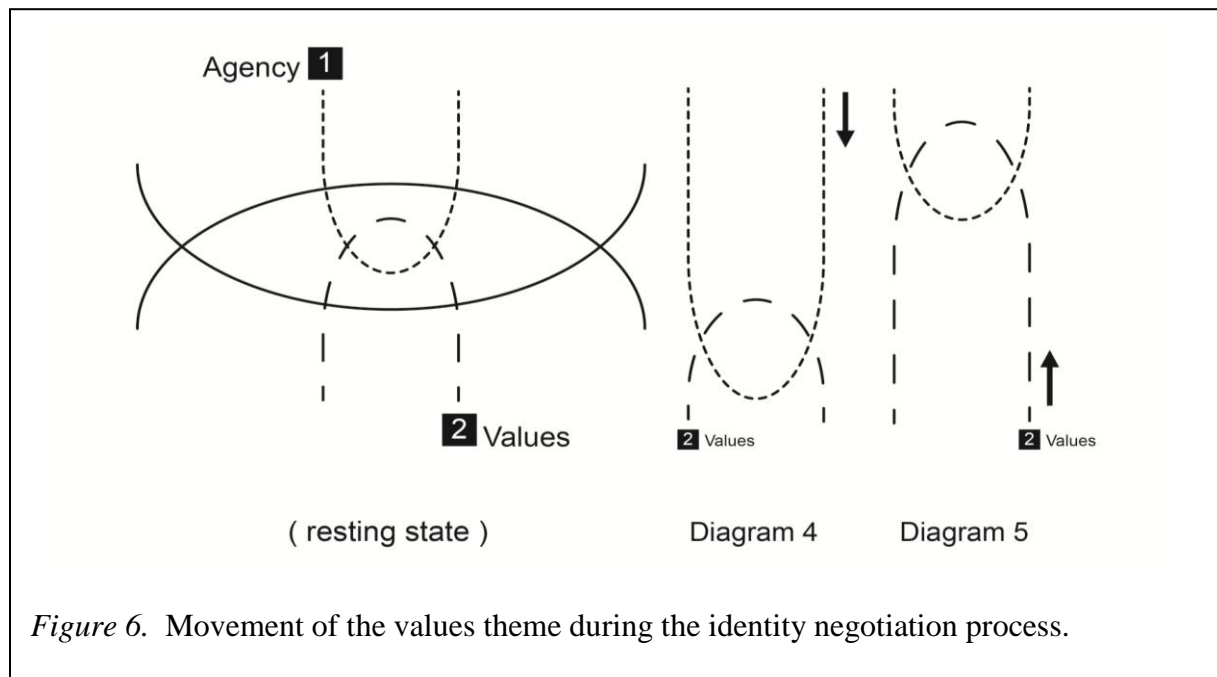


Diagram four shows the minimization of the professional self and counsellor identity when there is a complete (or significant) divestiture of both sometimes referred to as “identicide” (i.e., “one suppresses and even kills an identity that is seen to impede other valued identities” Ashforth et al., 2008, p. 355). This might occur if the personal values and/or counsellor values are diminished or threatened by the incoming or anticipated professional identity. Counsellors in response to a marginalization of their counsellor identity and its value base which is resonant with their personal values system could respond by “rationalizing the dissonance” or “fulfill them in a perfunctory manner” or “do nothing, perhaps pleading helplessness” or the threatened identity could be “cognitively decoupled or buffered such that conflicts are less apparent” (Ashforth et al., 2008, p. 355). Findings showed some respondents chose to use small acts of

resistance or “wearing the title but not becoming the psychotherapist” at this point in their negotiation process tending more toward buffering their counsellor identity or rationalizing dissonance. Other participants expressed resolve to push back or take an uncustomary militant response when the values base of their counsellor or career counsellor identity was somehow diminished or marginalized and there was suppression rather than an outright divestiture (i.e., *identicide*) of the competing identities. In the case of these latter participants, they negotiated this process by giving the valued identity higher priority and safeguarding the integrity of that identity by nurturing and upholding it through their day-to-day practice, as they communicated with clients or allied professions, in their professional development focus, and ongoing research endeavours.

Moving in the opposite direction, diagram five illustrates an instance where an endorsement of certain professional values could strongly influence those held within the counsellor identity and although these may be incongruent with personal values and create internal tensions (i.e., *existential questioning*) they could also bring a sense of clarity or advantage with the modified professional identity (e.g., new occupational directives, status, recognition by public). For example, if core counselling values (e.g., humanistic theoretical perspective, client empowerment) were somehow diminished or replaced by incoming value systems (e.g., audit culture, medical or diagnostic models, evidence-based approaches) individual counsellors could decide, after much negotiation or adaptive moves on their part to either “hybridize” (McGivern et al., 2015) their counsellor identity, or to “abandon[ing] the trajectory associated with the current identity” and pursue a completely different career path or search for a way to bridge their counsellor identity with another values compatible profession (e.g., teaching, nursing) (Ibarra, 2007, p. 10; see also Cummings, 1990). This is not hard to envision given some participants in this study came from these compatible professions to counselling in their evolving pursuit of becoming a carer and quite interestingly, two study participants reported having entertained the idea of initiating a new professional path (e.g., funeral chaplain, religious ministry) that might allow them to fulfil deeper spiritual values. Some study participants perceived certain benefits (i.e., recognition, status, economic parity) that might accrue from adopting and integrating incoming value systems (examples previously mentioned) and were aware this could require some shifting of personal and counsellor values but none were supportive of anything that would severely compromise either of these.

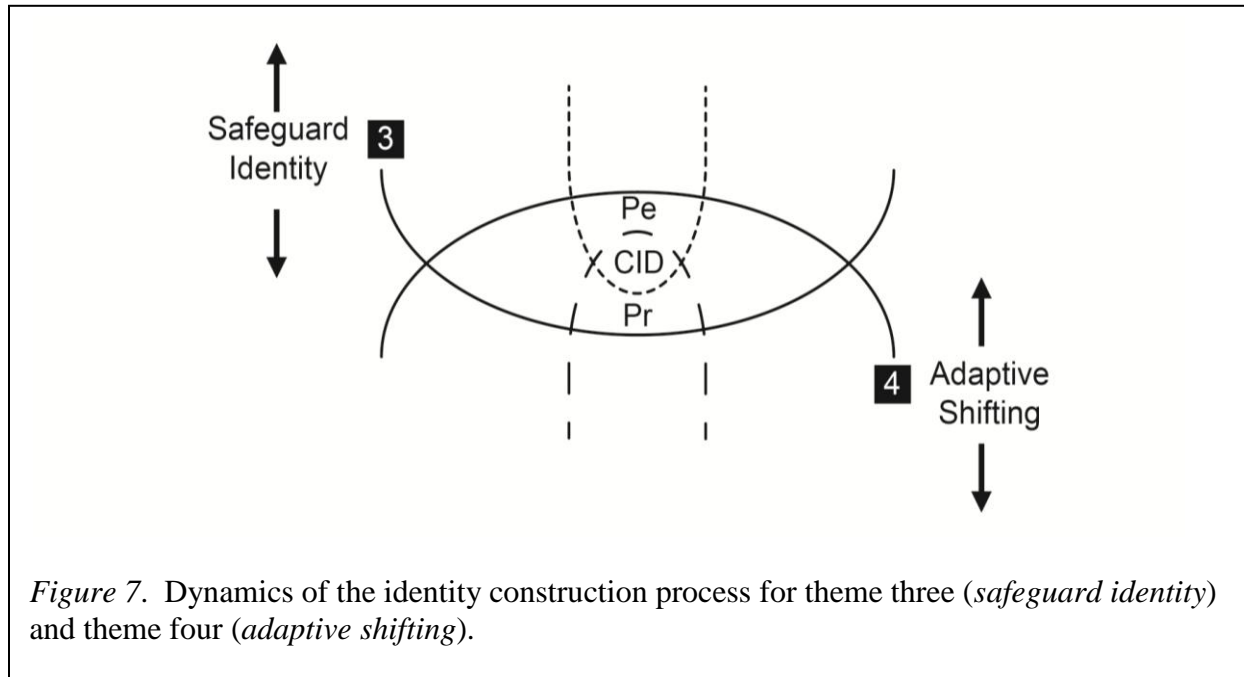
Looking now to the agency theme (still looking at the central section of the thematic diagram as shown in Figure 1), the second curve represents movement in the construction processes which occurs when counsellors take ownership for the shaping, refinement, and negotiation of their identities (personal and social) through various sense making methods like “sensebreaking” or “sensegiving” (Ashforth et al., 2008, pp. 342-344). Participants in this study reported using self-questioning, meaning-making and seeking a good fit with the counsellor identity which coincides with elements of the sensebreaking process reported by Pratt (2000) in the identification literature. Sensegiving on the other hand involves the divestiture of an existing identity for a new identity which can help to resolve the uncertainty of liminality or being between identities (Ashforth, 2001) and is done when a profession or social group directing members toward the preferred identity which is clearly outlined and demarcated (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). For counsellors in this study the new identities were quite ambiguous and continually evolving (i.e., registered psychotherapist, registered mental health therapist) while their existing identity (counsellor) already perceived as unsettled (Gale & Austin, 2003; Remley & Herlihy, 2007) and quite nascent (Gazzola et al., 2010). Although these counsellors were in a period of uncertainty or liminal transition the sensegiving process could not be substantiated given their existing identity (counsellor) was in some respects as uncertain as the anticipated one(s).

In addition to being guided by values and a sense of agency, counsellors also orchestrate the ebb and flow of their identity work by drawing upon two additional aspects to facilitate this construction process. These two themes are illustrated in the thematic diagram as the two larger curves and represent a broader layer of counsellor identity negotiation that involved safeguarding identity integrity and using adaptive shifting in response to ensuing tensions which will be outlined in the next section.

Themes Three and Four: Safeguarding Identity Integrity and Adaptive Shifting

Simultaneous to the navigation and shaping of professional identity employed during the integration of agency and values, there was a related level of response counsellors initiated during their identity work when change factors began to impinge, disrupt or expanded the interrelated identities. These two response modes are captured in themes three and four (i.e., safeguarding identity integrity and adaptive shifting) in the diagram (Figure 7) and like themes

one and two are subject to continuous multi-directional movement (moving arrows on larger curves indicate this).



A few factors that participants viewed as impinging on the growth of their professional identity were life-based hardships, negative mentoring, or lack of employment opportunities. Their response was to adapt and shift their professional identity in accordance with their values (e.g., maintain aesthetic coherence) while taking ownership for these modifications that sometimes involved “bending and pivoting” around their core counsellor identity. Participants identified factors (e.g., specialized practice designation, being an internship supervisor) that extended their professional identity also triggering an adaptive shift in their counsellor identity in some cases making it a secondary identity or just a “dim shadow,” as one person described it. Whether these factors proved to be impinging or expanding, participants countered these identity challenges by safeguarding the integrity of their counsellor identity in a variety of ways. Some maintained their counsellor identity and values while working in non-counselling settings by espousing a certain demeanour of “counsellor-ness,” others assumed a related title while quietly preserving their innate counsellor identity, some incorporated aspects of their specialized

practice when appropriate, and others pursued entrepreneurial ventures where they could integrate their counsellor identity within another professional sphere.

There was a willingness on the part of respondents to be adaptive, flexible, and creative when faced with changes during their identity work but they also demonstrated a resolve to safeguard the values at the heart of their counsellor identity which sat right up against their personal values base. What the participants were making clear was that counsellor identity was rooted in values, the very essence and most important dimension of their identity it would seem and so much so that threats to their way of being as a counsellor could not be resolved by some form of adaptive response or a willingness to pivot. As respondents explained through their words and indirectly through their metaphors or diagrams, the things that “tear at you” or make you “feel like you could break at anytime” are forces or events that chip away at the values that fuel their counsellor identity, giving it meaning and purpose.

During their experiential accounts, participants highlighted a variety of instances involving their values when they had shaped and facilitated the negotiation of their identity work such as, “feeling othered” for holding certain counsellor values, or clients being appreciative of their caring, compassionate and authentic presence, deciding to leave a workplace where counsellor values were diminished, finding a synergy of values with a mentor, or courageously taking legal action to defend counsellor values/ethics. The unfolding regulation changes as respondents understood them would bring instrumental or logistical challenges that could alter how they worked, the titles that could be used, impose restrictions on scope of practice, require them to meet academic or clinical criteria for registration and licensure but concern increased when they felt there could be or were encroachments on their counsellor values. This awareness varied across the study participants as some reported feeling well informed, others were confused by the ongoing changes and information being provided, and a few were intermittently checking on what was transpiring.

Theme Five: Organic and Emergent Growth

The fifth theme depicted in the thematic diagram (*the shaded area*) represents the organic, emergent growth that pervades and draws together the other four themes associated with the identity construction process (Figure 8).

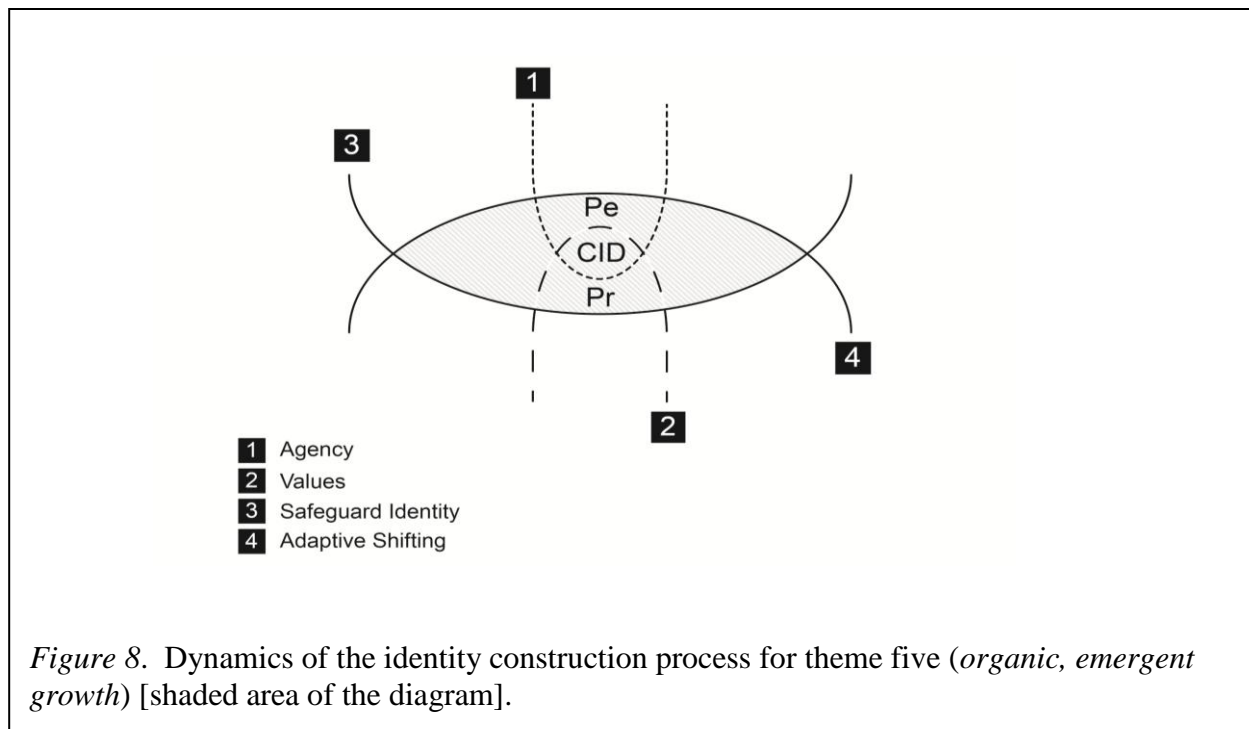


Figure 8. Dynamics of the identity construction process for theme five (*organic, emergent growth*) [shaded area of the diagram].

Framing counsellor identity construction as a process of professional becoming that is iterative and evolving was congruent with the approach described by respondents (Scanlon, 2011). It was evident in the participant diagrams, and validated through iterations of the graphic elicitation diagram, that counsellors conceptualized this process as dynamic, intricate, weaving, and fluid with both emergent and enduring elements. This theme of growth and emergence continually surfaced in the dialogue, metaphors, diagrams, narrative accounts, experiences, examples, and visual images provided by interview and focus group participants alike. The graphic elicitation diagram with its branching, fluid, evocative shaping in many ways captured this energy and movement. Perhaps as one participant suggested “a three-dimensional version” would have been a better way to depict the reality of this process. In the thematic diagram it forms an omnipresent backdrop that unites the four other themes which are continually moving in accordance with circumstances and the responses counsellors choose throughout the construction process.

Identity Negotiation Moments of Two Study Participants

In order to further understand the negotiated process as it is being illustrated through the use of the thematic diagram, two participant examples are offered. The first one was part of the virtual focus group and the other an interview participant. The respondent in the virtual focus group described how a number of external forces were diminishing the growth of her identity as a counsellor by devaluing it and how this necessitated an identity negotiation. She described feeling “under-compensated” and at times “receiving a lack of respect from other professionals (e.g. doctors) and non-counselling others (bosses etc.)” in her workplace. This angered her because at times she felt like she was going against her counsellor values, “I am breaking a ‘rule’ of being a counsellor” in order to abide by the values assigned to her as a professional in that workplace. Looking at the agency and values themes in the diagram, this counsellor is being asked to shift some of their counsellor values (values curve moves down) to accommodate those attributed to professionals who work in that particular organization which she has done (adaptive response) but doing this can “really crush me.” She goes on to mention how this triggers burnout, compassion fatigue, and some “existential questioning about the purpose of what we do as counsellors.” In an agential move this counsellor launches into reflection and self-questioning about “whether this is worthwhile for me or worthwhile at all” (sense of agency taking hold). To gain control of the negotiation of her counsellor identity she does two things: the first is “owning my own approach and philosophy of counselling” by saying no at times when the identity congruence infringes on her values base (agency curve moves back as parts of counsellor identity are taken back even if only temporarily) and the second thing she does is tries to view her counsellor identity within the broader context of her profession rather than the workplace setting where it is misinterpreted or devalued (adaptive shifting).

This second identity negotiation tactic is somewhat problematic as she points out in an indirect manner by referring to the “psychotherapy regulation business” which in her view has caused disequilibrium rather than a sure footing for her counsellor identity and profession. Frustrated by the different training requirements but shared scope of practice for psychotherapists and mental health therapists under the proposed regulation at that time, she stated “I was really pissed off. It made me feel like the education I have (Masters) is not valued, because clearly they don’t mind diluting what it means to do our job.” Not having the values safeguarded within her profession because of the impending regulatory changes appears to have

added some unanticipated tensions and made her identity negotiation within her workplace even more difficult to facilitate (referring here to the second negotiation tactic she was using in her adaptive shifting). Not completely daunted by the necessity to negotiate her counsellor identity amid these evolving change events and external change factors she offers as a backdrop to all of this her desire to pursue private practice as perhaps one way to grow her counsellor identity (organic and emergent growth theme).

One of the interview participants described how they have negotiated their counsellor identity which centres on her career specialization amid misunderstandings by clients, professional colleagues, employers, the public and even fellow counsellors. She starts by pointing out how her workplace colleagues do not differentiate between a career counsellor and an employment counsellor which extends beyond to other settings where guidance counsellor is more readily identified. When job titles do not reflect her identity as a career counsellor she takes ownership for clarifying her unique identity on her business cards, clearly communicating her education and training to clients and colleagues when appropriate, explaining how the difference “makes the conversation more straightforward if I introduce myself right away as a career counsellor,” attending career related conferences or training, and doing so out of “professional pride” (agency is increased to enlarge the counsellor identity). In some settings where personal counselling has been the focus she has had to adjust her way of working with clients and suppress her career counsellor identity to abide by the mandate of their services (adaptive shifting) but as she pointed out these two counsellor identities cannot be compartmentalized nor would she approach her identity negotiation in that manner. She explained how at times the career counsellor identity has been suppressed out of necessity for securing employment (personal identity needs given more value) and how this in turn perpetuated safeguarding the integrity of her counsellor identity in one particular setting (shift in the values from career to counsellor ones). During her counselling studies she had also met with challenges to growing as a career counsellor and constructing her unique professional identity when the only practicum placement available was in a psychotherapy thus triggering more identity negotiation (adaptive shifting). Not daunted by this, the participant stated she is helping with the expansion of a career counselling business in a volunteer capacity (adaptive shifting) in order to nurture her career counsellor identity which will be at the centre of her future endeavours or employment (organic and emergent growth).

For this participant her counsellor identity is made up of multiple identities (career counsellor identity is the primary one) and the adaptive shifting that occurs on all five dimensions represented in the model is continually in flux, more incremental, and “transformative” which she captured in the metaphor of “changing hats.” This sense of a fluidity or constant ebb and flow of her identity negotiation (mostly between career and personal counselling) was not depicted in the same manner when she spoke about what the new college of psychotherapists and some of the regulatory changes might mean for her career counsellor identity. In her view these changes may provide a strong push into a non-counselling profession (e.g., advisory work) or solidify her career counselling path where psychotherapy work might be excluded (i.e., no need to register with the proposed college of psychotherapy). Identity negotiation in this case would be either be terminated (thematic diagram becomes irrelevant) or precipitate another identity negotiation moment when statutory regulation comes into full proclamation.

To summarize the main points of this discussion section, the counsellors in this case study negotiated their professional identity amid the context of regulatory change by drawing upon a number of strategies. Some of these included covert resistance, compartmentalization, and holding a strong conviction to their personal and professional values. During this period of uncertainty and transition there were important facilitators such as mentors, workplace or internship experiences, happenstance events, and peer validation that lent support to their identity construction work. Portraying and defining the path to professional becoming was viewed as a lifelong endeavour to preserve what they described as their “counsellor-ness.” Many spoke about the importance of finding meaning, conferring purpose, realizing strongly held values, and having a sense of agency during their identity work. Some of these insights were explored further by way of a thematic diagram that was intended to demonstrate the active, responsive dimensions of the identity construction process employed by the respondents which were: having a sense of agency, being guided by values, safeguarding identity integrity, using adaptive shifting, and fostering organic, emergent growth. Having concluded this discussion of the findings, the next two sections address the limitations and offer some possible implications for practice, training, and the profession.

Limitations

This study, like all research projects, had a number of limitations. First, because of the geographical breadth of the province chosen for this case study there is a built in limitation as counsellors from some parts may not have been able to participate and therefore the findings may not reflect or be applicable to all Ontario counsellors. Efforts were made to reach as many counsellors as possible and the inclusion of a virtual focus group helped to increase this probability. Second, there were methodological limitations associated with the learning management system, Blackboard Learn as some participants may not have been familiar with this e-education platform or the technical demands and so may not have been able to respond as fully as they would have liked during the virtual discussion forums. Third, being an asynchronous (not live) virtual focus group the immediacy of responses and continuity of the dialogue was subject to the time schedules of the participants over the course of the day (from 6 am to 12 midnight). As such, participants may not have received timely or lively responses to their comments and because of work or personal schedules there may have been only a limited window within their day to read through the conversation threads and post further comments. Fourth, although a proportionate amount of time was set aside within the interviews for the diagramming exercise and metaphor request, participants may have benefited from having more time for reflection and offered further insights if time constraints had been more flexible. Finally, as with all single case studies one must be careful about generalizing findings to other groups of counsellors. This study has concentrated on the construction of professional identity by a group of counsellors during a rare incidence of professional regulation within a large, significant provincial jurisdiction as it was in progress. Construction processes and identity work by counsellors in other jurisdictions where the roll out of regulatory frameworks has varied or is still under debate and there are differences in population and geographical size may be quite different from those experienced by the respondents in this qualitative case study.

The aim of the study was particularization, to concentrate on the uniqueness of this single case, and therefore generalizing to other cases was not a priority. However, there may be some grounds for a modest “naturalistic generalization” (Stake, 1995, p. 85) involving a similarity of experience with another group of counsellors, specifically addictions counsellors who also share a rather nascent professional identity and are negotiating their identity work amid unfolding regulatory changes (Keller & Dermatis, 1999; Kerwin, Walker-Smith, & Kirby, 2006). Despite

these limitations, the study offers timely insights into the construction of counsellor professional identity during a period of unprecedented change that might be useful to individual counsellors from many levels of experience, practice settings, or specialization; those designing or facilitating counsellor education and training programs; professional associations both provincial and national; and researchers devoted to expanding the scholarship on how counsellors construct professional identity. The intention of this study was to focus on the experiential accounts of counsellors going about their identity work while regulatory legislation was being introduced, discussed, and implemented in real time to deepen understanding about identity construction processes. This was not an impact study looking at professional regulation and legislative outcomes; rather it formed more of a backdrop or context for this contemporary case study leaving the judging or measurement more appropriately to an environmental assessment by future researchers.

Implications

This case study provided a unique and fortuitous opportunity to study the shaping and navigation of counsellor professional identity in the midst of an unprecedented change event that was to bring about the creation of a college of psychotherapy. From the findings there appear to be implications for counsellors, counsellor education and training, the profession and future research.

Implications for Counsellors

With implementation of the regulatory legislation, Ontario counsellors will have no choice but to register with the CRPO if they want to continue practicing what is now “psychotherapy” in their province (Psychotherapy Act, 2007). While some of the study participants demonstrated principled defiance or planned small acts of resistance, others assumed a more wait-and-see attitude about the implications of the CRPO. Mandatory registration will bring real tensions and the affect on counsellor identity could bring disequilibrium, crystallization, self-review, or perhaps consolidation. Encouraging counsellors to consider mentorships as a way to support other counsellors and promoting dialogue about their own identity work, share ideas used and proactive approaches taken are potential routes that evolve from the findings of this study.

Participants also demonstrated a willingness to be flexible and adaptive during the construction of their professional identity when change circumstances or happenstance events

arose. Some adopted an agential, proactive mind-set about their identity work in keeping with the self-directed, values-driven attitude which is the earmark of professionals who take a protean approach to their career path favouring flexibility as well as mobility (Hall, 1987; Lifton, 1993). This resolve may not be enough to persuade these counsellors to stay in a province where regulation requires them to adopt a title and identity they feel is antithetical to their cherished counsellor identity. Migration to other more identity compatible jurisdictions is not so improbable given the proximity of such locales. Undoubtedly, both counsellors and clients would be impacted by such disruptions.

Implications for Counsellor Education and Training

Professional identity transitions caused by both exogenous and endogenous factors punctuate the entire career trajectory of counsellors (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Howard et al., 2006). Uncertainty and tensions associated with the negotiation of professional identity during such change events has implications for establishing a sound counsellor identity which participants viewed as a life project. Counsellor educators and supervisors are in a position to help counsellors identify skills and strategies to cope with professional identity transitions that are more unprecedented and exogenous. Contingency planning for identity ruptures is warranted given evidence for the interrelatedness of professional and personal identity (Alves & Gazzola, 2011).

Consideration of identity work as a lifelong project and the notion of “professional becoming” could offer useful frames for shaping training curriculum and counsellor professional development (Scanlon, 2011). Commitment and ownership for their identity project was evident among the study participants, but sustaining a prolonged investment required access to continuous learning opportunities beyond early formative training. Greater availability and access to affordable professional development resources that truly nurture counsellor professional identity, perhaps using some of the creative modalities that resonated with these study participants through learning collaborations with counsellor education programs, may be one avenue. Finding more ways to strengthen counsellor identity across the entire life/career span has benefits for counsellors, the profession, and service users.

It can be expected that there will be an increase in the number of counsellor education programs seeking accreditation from the CPRO within the new regulatory landscape (Government of Ontario, 2007). Programs pursuing accreditation will need to comply with the

competency profile established by the CPRO (2015). This means these institutions will be partially guided by the CRPO concerning pedagogical matters. Counsellor training programs hoping to foster the inclusion of counsellor professional identity issues and promote its distinct values will be challenged to do so when the framework encourages a psychotherapist identity and title use. The early training environment is often the wellspring for counsellor identity formation when students question their suitability, competence, and commitment often needing stable, positive reassurance (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). With the potential for a weakened counsellor orientation, there is a risk of compounding self-doubt and feeling othered.

Implications for the Profession

Based on findings that a sense of belonging with the profession bolsters the professional identity work of counsellors (Alves & Gazzola, 2011; Gazzola & Smith, 2007), there are direct benefits when strong advocacy efforts to promote the unique contributions and specialized skills of counsellors come to fruition. The membership must compel its professional leadership to invest effort and resources into building empirical evidence to support the value and merit of counsellor identity.

The CCPA may be called upon to play an active role in keeping the Canadian counsellor identity strong as well. Each province has authority over mental health matters and the result is variation across each jurisdiction. Titles and activities within the remit of counsellors could be very inconsistent as the trend toward statutory regulation moves across the country. A strong national association could prove to be instrumental as a unifying force, which has been prioritized elsewhere by other national professional associations for counsellors (ACA, 2009).

Research Implications

This was an important and fortuitous opportunity to get a glimpse of how counsellors were going about their identity construction while the regulatory landscape was just emerging in Ontario. Counsellor identity and how the profession will be shaped within a Canadian context are still in the early stages making the necessity of establishing a research agenda crucial for evidence-supported decisions on key issues. Similar to other uniquely Canadian issues well-studied for their implications on practice and professional identity (Sue, 2001), the requirements or features taking shape as the trend toward regulation grows across the provinces should also become an important item on that agenda. Professional identity researchers need to mobilize

their efforts to investigate the impact of implementing the new regulatory legislation by taking advantage of another fortuitous opportunity to gather outcome data in real time.

Some of the key influences on professional identity like work experience, setting, roles, self-directed learning, and certification have been investigated (Alves & Gazzola, 2011) but the introduction of regulatory legislation brings new and related issues. Counsellor training programs and curriculum will see changes to meet registration and accreditation, new requirements for providing and receiving supervision have been put forward, and decisions about membership in college and professional associations are just some of the areas where shifts are taking place (Martin et al., 2013). Continued exploration of influential factors associated with the regulation context relative to counsellor professional identity construction would test and draw out some of the tentative understanding captured in the thematic diagram.

There is intuitive appeal to statutory regulation of mental health professions. And although it is true that the College serves as an extra layer of protection for the clients (can lodge ethics complaints to the college rather than go to court), research has yet to demonstrate that regulation actually serves to protect the clients (House, 2012). As regulation continues to be a trend in Canada, mental health professions could benefit from developing research that demonstrates that this is ultimately beneficial to clients. Otherwise, regulation may be perceived as a self-serving initiative – carving out a piece of the land for the various professions.

Contributions to Knowledge

This case study proposes a few contributions to our knowledge about how counsellors construct and negotiate their professional identity amid changes to the remit of their profession. These assertions in some ways revisit the edges of what has been put forward on this topic while offering a few new ideas and filling in some of the particulars surrounding the dynamics of counsellor identity work.

Previous research has looked at professional identity mostly through the lenses of counsellor development or professional formation which has certainly established a foundation from which to expand and gain a more nuanced understanding of this life long process. Capitalizing on an unprecedented change event that is in progress and being experienced by a broad array of counsellors, this study supported the notion of professional identity construction as an active, dynamic process based on the experiential accounts of respondents. Moreover, this study alleges this more accurately reflects the fluctuations and erratic nature of identity work these counsellors are currently facing, offers a more comprehensive way to understand how identity construction plays out under threat or violation, and contributes further understanding by way of two related points.

First, counsellor identity needs to be the central concept when trying to understand how professional identity is shaped, negotiated, maintained, and portrayed especially during periods of disequilibrium and transformation that have profound import. This case illustrates how the personal and professional identities (of which the latter is but one of many social identities) are beneficially and flexibly realigned to meet the identity demands placed on the counsellor identity in order to safeguard the essence and values of what these respondents view as defensible. Counsellor identity is what is being negotiated by these counsellors because that is where they perceive the deepest infringement (currently or anticipated) and future conceptualizations of professional identity needs to start there with a full understanding that values and agency are the fuel that drives this arbitration of identities.

Second, this study proffers a new frame for understanding the construction of counsellor professional identity and that is the notion of professional “becoming” usually spoken about outside of the counselling literature (Scanlon, 2011) but very apropos for the realities of what it means to be a professional and profession in the coming decade. Certainly not a new frame nor is it a case of putting “old wine in new bottles” (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 7) yet, it provides an

aesthetic and practical way to capture the protean, chameleon like attributes of counsellor professional identity that is one of its hallmarks to be celebrated, fostered and which may ensure the longevity of the profession.

There was also something new added by approaching this phenomenon with this particular methodology as it brought together the individual voice (interviews), the collective dialogue (virtual focus group), the creative flow of insights (use of metaphors, participant diagrams, and graphic elicitation diagram), and a sense of provenance (observation and document review) which have further enriched the silhouettes drawn by previous researchers. Although other qualitative approaches have been employed (Alves & Gazzola, 2011; Nelson & Jackson, 2003; Swickert, 1997) to study counsellor professional identity, the use of a single case study design with this particular array of data collection methods has delivered a uniquely descriptive account of this phenomenon that is multifarious and deeply layered.

Finally, this case study has utilized a contemporary instance of counsellor professional identity construction to provide not only a rich description but to provide a tentative, context specific and cautiously rendered thematic diagram as a starting point for further discussion. The approach taken in this research has been one of discovery and looking from the bottom up, meaning the researcher listens to those experiencing the phenomenon for clues or insights about identity construction within their unique context. As such, this thematic diagram is surely a reflection of this particular group of counsellors, at this point in time, and relative to their current environment. However, the details of how they understand this process and the conceptualization of each element still tell enough about the general dynamics to be of use for future investigations that could refine, upend, and hopefully enhance what has been started here. The thematic diagram visually invites and hopefully provokes discussion or creative thinking about what counsellors are up to in their identity work.

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Appendices

*Appendix A**Characteristics of Qualitative Research*

Table A1

Ten Features of Qualitative Inquiry

Characteristic	Explanation
Naturalistic, field oriented	Study occurs in context of real life-world, not manipulated and direct interaction within natural setting where phenomena/issue is being experienced by participants, face-to-face interaction.
Emergent design	Initial research plan subject to shifts once field work and data collection begins, modifications as understanding deepens or situations change, remains open to changing paths as new things emerge.
Interpretive	Keys in on meaning perspectives, respects intuition, welcomes different views, findings are result of researcher-subject interactions, multiple views and interpretations within whole life context, concerned with particularization not universals.
Researcher as instrument	Researcher undertakes the data collection personally using such things as observation, interviewing, or documentary evidence; becomes primary data collection instrument in study.
Personalistic	Empathic stance and sensitivity during engagement with participants; vicarious understanding sought through participant's own views, meanings, and value commitments; issues are emic (i.e., emerges from individual); use of participants own words.
Process tracing	Concern is understanding and describing 'what' and 'how' issues, and less about outcomes, interest in dynamics of processes.
Holistic understanding	Reporting from multiple perspectives and sources, focus on complex interconnections and dynamics of system under study, identify an array of factors involved to explain phenomena in its entirety.
Inductive data analysis	Researcher builds from bottom up seeking patterns, themes, interrelationships and move toward higher level abstraction; pursuing exploration before confirmations; a 'pulling apart' and 'putting back together' of elements and associations.

Purposeful selection	This particular instance of the phenomena offers useful, insightful, rich information; the choice when it is a unique case or an occurrence that the researcher can learn the most from.
Data representation	Qualitative, detailed thick description in narrative form and persuasive language; collected data may be in text, visual, audio, video, or photographic format.

Sources: Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002; Stake, 2010.

Appendix B

Interview Script

Opening Remarks: *This is an exploratory, discovery driven research undertaking so throughout the interviews you are invited to use text, verbal and visual representations to express and transmit information. My role will be to document your **descriptive account of professional identity processing and capture this unique experience in a genuine manner.***

INTERVIEW ONE:

Here is an overview of what to expect during our interview session today, which will have two parts in total. First, I will ask a series of interview questions on your **sense of professional identity** and then some of your thoughts on **constructing and communicating** this identity. Following this, I will invite you to carry out a participatory diagramming exercise in which you create a visual interpretation of your process of identity construction. Your diagram will ensure I understand the concepts and ideas you are sharing during your interview. It will also provide a useful summary of your account and you can continue to make changes or additions to it between the first and second interview or during the latter portion of the second interview if you choose. Some drawing materials are provided and the focus is not on drawing ability so do not be concerned with artistry.

Do you have any questions about what we have discussed so far regarding the interview process?

PART I: Interview Questions

(i) Sense of Professional Identity

- When did you first begin to think about being a counsellor?
- How long have you been a counsellor and have any other careers come before this?
- What do you feel has influenced your sense of counsellor professional identity thus far?
- What comes to mind when you think of someone who is a professional counsellor?
- How do others know you are a counsellor?
- What do you think makes counsellors unique?
- How important is it to have a sense of belonging with the overall profession of counselling?
- Tell me about a moment when you felt a profound sense of being a counsellor – what was going on that made you identify with your profession?
- If we were to meet in five years, what might you tell me about yourself as a professional counsellor?

(ii) Constructing and Communicating a Professional Identity

- If you were asked to develop a blueprint/put out a tip sheet on how to construct your professional identity as a counsellor what would it include?

- What are some of the resources that help you build your professional identity?
- If you were to identify what strengthens your counsellor identity what comes to mind first?
- What are some of the challenges or barriers that you encounter day-to-day that might diminish your status or confidence as a professional counsellor?
- What role do you play in navigating or shaping your professional identity as a counsellor? How are professional associations or your workplace environment involved in this process?
- When would you consider your professional identity solidified or do you feel constructing a professional identity is a lifelong project?
- What identity markers, such as outward appearance, professional demeanour or other norms of behavior tell others you are a professional counsellor?
- What would be the most effective way for you to portray or tell the story of how your professional identity is unfolding to another counsellor, your supervisor, or perhaps just to yourself? [e.g., a narrative piece be it a blog or journal, self-reflection practice, through some art medium, or some other form]

PART II: Participatory Diagramming

I would now like to ask you to construct a visual summary diagram for communicating how you are negotiating and constructing your identity as a professional counsellor. Feel free to use conceptual diagrams like mind maps or visual metaphors as tools for sharing this information.

Is there anything more you would like to add before we conclude this interview?

Closing remarks:

Thank you for participating in today's interview and being so generous with your time. I especially appreciate your openness to undertake the diagramming activity today and please bring your diagram with you to the second interview.

INTERVIEW TWO:

Welcome back to the second interview. Here is an overview of what to expect during our interview session today. I will start by asking you to answer a few interview questions on how you have negotiated your counsellor identity and navigated this evolving process during your professional career amid various change events/contexts. Next, I will be inviting you to consider a possible metaphor that portrays this experience. You can explain your metaphor using a narrative, storied approach or even through some visual representation/diagram. Prior to the close of this interview you may also take a few minutes to make any changes or additions to your participatory diagram that you have brought back today from our first interview session.

Do you have any questions about what we have discussed so far regarding the interview process?

PART I: Interview Questions

(i) Negotiating counsellor identity (amid a change context)

General Change Context

- Thinking back, can you tell me about any critical incidents or precipitating events that have challenged your professional identity as a counsellor?
- Would you describe this as a hindrance or an empowering experience?
- Were you aware it was happening, how did you know, what did you do and what were some of the feelings at the time?
- What about other identity transition phases like going from student to novice counsellor or say counsellor to supervisor – how did you find these change events ...energizing, distracting, natural, unsettling?
- How do you decide which components of your counsellor identity to keep, set aside, or perhaps refine when transitions occur?

Regulatory Change Context

- I would like to talk a bit now about the current move in Ontario to regulate mental health professionals and how you are continuing to shape your counsellor identity amid these ongoing changes. Perhaps if you can start by sharing with me what bearing this is having on you as a counsellor and where you see yourself in relation to the newly appointed College of Psychotherapists and (Registered Mental Health Therapists) of Ontario?
- Where do you see yourself as a counsellor in relation to the proposed title(s) for registration?
- As a counsellor in Ontario, are you able to continue your identity construction work in the midst of the current uncertainty as details are sorted out?
- What is helpful and what have been some of the challenges so far?
- How would you describe the approach you are adopting as you negotiate these changes? [wait and see? pro-active?]

Future Change Context – Ongoing Change

- As you consider the ongoing work of your identity construction in the next while do you envision having to make incremental refinements or perhaps a more significant alteration to who you are as a counsellor given the proposed regulatory changes?
- How likely is it that you would consider abandoning the trajectory you have set with respect to continuing as a counsellor and would this impact your professional identity?
- Would you see the need for a provisional identity – one that bridges the existing one with the anticipated one – at this point? Can you describe the attributes or characteristics of this tentative identity and what would you do to reconcile this one with your current counsellor identity?

PART II: Exploring Metaphors of Professional Identity

Metaphors allow us to draw comparisons between two things that are for the most part not alike yet can be considered similar in one important way. Sometimes they can make experiences more meaningful or lucid by transferring the more abstract elements into something concrete. I invite you then to take a few minutes to reflect on any images, mythical stories, symbols, prose, musical lyrics, or archetypes that will help you to isolate either a single or series of **metaphors**

to describe your identity construction process and how you are currently negotiating your professional identity in the midst of current change.

(If time permits two questions for further exploration could be posed: If you were to look back to an earlier time, what would the metaphor look like? How might the passage of time change your metaphor?)

PART III: Revisit the Participatory Diagram (*show to participant*)

Is there anything more you would like to add to your diagram before we conclude this interview?

Closing Remarks:

I will be analyzing the information you have provided during the two interview sessions and combining this with information provided from a number of similarly constructed interviews that will take place over the coming months. A group of case study portraits will be developed from this data and presented to a few of the interviewees for member checking. Would you be willing to provide your thoughts and feedback on these as a means of ensuring the trustworthiness of the findings? A preliminary draft of the final analysis of the data will also be sent out to a few of the study participants for feedback and refinement. Would you be interested in providing a member check at this later stage?

Thank you for participating in this study and being so generous with your time. Especially appreciated is your openness to being part of this creative research procedure.

Appendix C

Interview Recruitment Letter



**Counsellors Negotiating Professional Identity in the Midst of Exogenous Change:
A Case Study**

Kate Gignac (PhD Candidate)
Dr. Nick Gazzola (Thesis Supervisor)

Fellow counsellors,

I am interested in understanding your sense of counsellor identity and how you are currently going about the work of shaping your professional self-image. As a counsellor-in-training, novice or experienced counsellor in Ontario you may be aware that changes are taking place in the landscape of mental health services in this province which will impact counselling and psychotherapy practice. The purpose of this study is to understand how counsellors like you are constructing, reworking, or maintaining their professional identity amid these changes and to provide a descriptive, meaningful account of this experience. Your participation will contribute to the completion of my Ph.D. thesis in Educational Counselling at the University of Ottawa and extend the discussion on the professional identity of counsellors in Canada.

For the purpose of this study a counsellor is a professional holding, or in the process of completing a Master's degree in counselling or some related field where a supervised practicum is required. Counsellors who hold a national credential as a Canadian Certified Counsellor or belong to other certification and licensing bodies that have equivalent credentialing requirements will be considered for inclusion. Anticipated study participants will consist of: students (currently enrolled in counsellor training programs), novice counsellors (within first 5 years post-master's degree), and experienced counsellors (more than 5 years) including counsellor educators.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to fill out a brief demographic questionnaire (which will take no more than 10 minutes) prior to the first interview. You will then be invited to participate in two face-to-face interviews (90 minutes for the first and 60 minutes for the second) both of which will be scheduled at your convenience within the time frame of approximately one month. During the interviews you will be asked to respond to a number of semi-structured interview questions using both verbal and visual means to express your thoughts on this topic. The interview will be audio-recorded and any responses that you give will be kept confidential. Your anonymity will be protected in any written accounts of the research and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. Recruitment will be done by Kate Gignac the principal investigator and interviewer. This research project has received approval by the University of Ottawa, Office of Research Ethics and Integrity. The thesis supervisor is Dr. Nick Gazzola, email: gazzola@uottawa.ca.

Please contact me **Kate Gignac** at _____ if you are interested in participating in the study and I will be happy to share more details with you. I look forward to hearing your thoughts on counsellor professional identity.

Appendix D

Ethics Approval Notice

File Number: 06-12-13

Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 08/01/2012



Université d'Ottawa **University of Ottawa**
 Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Ethics Approval Notice
Social Science and Humanities REB

Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)

<u>First Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Nicola	Gazzola	Education / Education	Supervisor
Kate	Gignac	Education / Education	Student Researcher

File Number: 06-12-13

Type of Project: PhD Thesis

Title: Counsellors Negotiating Professional Identity in the Midst of Exogenous Change: A Case Study

<u>Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</u>	<u>Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</u>	<u>Approval Type</u>
08/01/2012	07/31/2013	Ia

(Ia: Approval, Ib: Approval for initial stage only)

Special Conditions / Comments:
 N/A

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550, rue Cumberland Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5 Canada
 550 Cumberland Street Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5 Canada
 (613) 562-5337 • Telec./Fax (613) 562-5338
<http://www.research.uottawa.ca/ethics/index.html>
<http://www.recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie/index.html>

File Number: 06-12-13

Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 08/01/2012



Université d'Ottawa **University of Ottawa**
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

This is to confirm that the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board identified above, which operates in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and other applicable laws and regulations in Ontario, has examined and approved the application for ethical approval for the above named research project as of the Ethics Approval Date indicated for the period above and subject to the conditions listed the section above entitled "Special Conditions / Comments".

During the course of the study the protocol may not be modified without prior written approval from the REB except when necessary to remove subjects from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) pertain to only administrative or logistical components of the study (e.g. change of telephone number). Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes which increase the risk to participant(s), any changes which considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project and safety of the participant(s). Modifications to the project, information/consent documentation, and/or recruitment documentation, should be submitted to this office for approval using the "Modification to research project" form available at:
<http://www.research.uottawa.ca/ethics/forms.html>

Please submit an annual status report to the Protocol Officer 4 weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to either close the file or request a renewal of ethics approval. This document can be found at:
<http://www.research.uottawa.ca/ethics/forms.html>

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Office at extension 5387 or by e-mail at: ethics@uOttawa.ca.

Signature:


Riana Marcotte
Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research
For Barbara Graves, Chair of the Social Sciences and Humanities REB

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550, rue Cumberland Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5 Canada
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<http://www.recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie/index.html>

*Appendix E**Interview Consent Form*

Consent to Participate in Research (Interview)

This consent form (a copy of which has been given to you) is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, feel free to consult further with Kate Gignac, or with Nick Gazzola, at 562-5800, ext. 4030, email: gazzola@uottawa.ca. This study is part of the completion of a Ph.D. thesis titled “Counsellors negotiating professional identity in the midst of exogenous change: A case study” by Kate Gignac. The thesis supervisor is Dr. Nick Gazzola. Please take time to read this carefully.

1. Purpose:

The objective of this project is to examine how counsellors working in Ontario construct their professional identity. Specifically, the goal is to understand how individual counsellors are negotiating and shaping their professional identity during current changes to the regulation of mental health professionals within the province. Your participation in this study will be an important part of meeting these objectives and may contribute to your own understanding of counsellor professional identity.

2. Procedures:**Semi-Structured Interviews:**

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to take part in two face-to-face interviews (90 minutes for the first and 60 minutes for the second one) both of which will be scheduled at your convenience within the time frame of approximately one month. The interviews will take place at a location that is convenient and agreeable to you and the interviewer, such as a workplace or training venue. During these two interviews you will be asked to respond to a number of semi-structured interview questions and be invited to do some conceptual diagramming. The interview will be audio-recorded. You will also be asked to fill out a brief demographic questionnaire (approximately 10 minutes) prior to commencing the first interview. Any responses that you give will be kept confidential and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

At the outset of the interview a brief observation phase will take place to record and verify with you any markers that communicate professional identity such as the presence of physical artifacts (e.g., certificates, diplomas) or environmental indicators (e.g., confidential workspace, appearance or behavior norms). You will be the only participant the researcher will be posing questions to in the event some clarification is needed.

You are also invited during the interview to provide the researcher with any text or visual documents that speak to your identity construction or negotiation process for inclusion (e.g., professional portfolios, published articles, project or promotional materials).

The tapes of the interviews will be transcribed so that the dialogue can be coded. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, all personal identifying information will be deleted or altered to conceal your identity as well as the identity of places and persons you may mention. Your taped

interview and transcripts of the interview will be coded by the primary researcher and one expert in the field of counselling and psychotherapy will be consulted to ensure quality coding. Be assured that coders and transcribers, as well as outside consultants will be bound by a code of ethics that regulates counselling professional conduct relating to all matters in the conduct of research, including confidentiality. Moreover, all information will be treated as private and confidential even after identifying features have been removed. Tapes and transcripts will be coded to remove any identifying information and kept in a locked filing cabinet in the thesis supervisor's (Nick Gazzola) office. The code keys will be stored in a reference file separate from the data set. All of the tapes and transcripts will be kept for ten years and will be destroyed by the end of 2021.

The results of this study may be presented at research conferences or published in scholarly journals. Participants may be quoted but their identities will be safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms. In all matters regarding the communication of results, your anonymity will in no way be compromised. Once completed, the results of the investigation will be made available to you upon request.

If you would like information about the ethical conduct of the project, or would like to express concerns, contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research:

Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research
Research Grants and Ethics Services, University of Ottawa
Tabaret Hall, Room 154
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5
Tel: (613) 562-5387
E-Mail: ethics@uottawa.ca

3. Conditions of participation:

- I understand the purpose of this study and how much time it entails, and that during the research process I may learn more about myself and counsellor professional identity.
- I understand that participating in this study is entirely voluntary.
- I understand how confidentiality will be maintained during this project.
- I understand the anticipated uses of the data and that publication and communication of results will be done in such a way as to ensure that all participants will remain anonymous.

Your signature on this form indicates you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this research and agree to participate in this research. In no way does this waive your legal rights and it also does not release anyone involved with the research from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact:

Kate Gignac at

Or

Nick Gazzola, Ph.D.
Faculty of Education
University of Ottawa
Tel: (613) 562-5800, ext. 4030
E-Mail: gazzola@uottawa.ca

Participant's Name (please print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Interviewer's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix F

Demographics of Study Participants

Table F1. Demographic Information on Interview Participants

Interview Participants					
Participant	Age	Gender	Prof Designation(s)	Practice Setting	Experience Level
P-1	32	F	Professional Counsellor	university counselling services	novice (< 5yrs)
P-2	25	F	Counselling Intern	university counselling services	student
P-3	34	M	Coordinator	university counselling services	experienced (> 5yrs)
P-4	66	F	Marriage Counsellor	private practice	experienced
P-5	66	F	Psychotherapist/Marriage & Family Therapist	private practice	experienced
P-6	34	F	Art Therapist	community mental health/non-profit	novice
P-7	33	F	Certified Canadian Counsellor	college counselling services	experienced
P-8	34	F	Certified Canadian Counsellor/PhD Student	university counselling services	novice
P-9	33	F	Clinical Psychotherapist/Crisis Counsellor	university/government mental health services/crisis	novice
P-10	59	M	Counselling Psychologist/Professor	counselling education/private practice	experienced
N=10	25-66 years	M= 2 F=8			S=1 N=4 E=5

Table F2. Demographic Information on Virtual Focus Group Participants

Virtual Focus Group Participants					
Participant	Age	Gender	Prof Designation(s)	Practice Setting	Experience Level
FG-1	47	F	Counsellor-in-training/Student	n/a	student
FG-2	30	F	Canadian Certified Counsellor	Private practice(animal/outdoor)	novice (< 5yrs)
FG-3	28	F	Professional Counsellor	University counselling services	novice
FG-4	48	F	Counsellor-in-training	n/a	student
FG-5	62	F	Mental Health Therapist/Counsellor	Private practice(rural)	experienced (> 5yrs)
FG-6	61	F	Counselling Psychology MA/MEd	Private practice	experienced
FG-7	56	F	Psychotherapist/Marriage & Family Therapist/Canadian Certified Counsellor	Family Health Team (rural)	experienced
FG-8	29	M	Counsellor-in-training/Student	n/a	student
FG-9	29	F	Canadian Certified Counsellor	Seeking employment	novice
FG-10	24	F	Counsellor-in-training/Student	n/a	student
FG-11	51	F	Psychotherapist PhD	Private practice, Family Health Team	experienced

FG-12	47	F	Registered Counselling Therapist (Candidate) /Canadian Certified Counsellor	Private practice	novice
FG-13	48	F	Canadian Certified Counsellor	Crisis mental health services, non-profit	experienced
FG-14	56	F	Canadian Certified Counsellor	Community counselling services, non-profit	novice
N=14	24-62 yrs	M=1 F=13			S=4 N=5 E=5

Table F3. *Demographic Information on Interview and Focus Group Participants: Self-Identified Title(s)*

Self-identified title(s)	INT Participants [n=10]	FG Participants [n=14]
Counsellor	9	8
Counselling Therapist	3	3
Mental Health Therapist	0	4
Clinical Counsellor	0	3
Career Counsellor	2	2
Conseiller/Conseillere D'orientation	1	0
Marriage And Family Therapist	3	0
Psychoeducator	0	1
Counsellor-In-Training	0	2
Program Coordinator	1	0
Clinical Psychotherapist	1	0
Trauma/Crisis Counsellor	2	0
Art Therapist	1	0
Psychotherapist	7	7
Child And Family Counsellor	1	0
Professor	1	0
Counselling Psychologist	1	0
Therapist	1	1
Mental Health Counsellor	0	2

71% of participants self-identified as a 'Counsellor'

25% of participants self-identified as a 'Counselling Therapist'

58% of participants self-identified as a 'Psychotherapist'

Table F4. *Demographic Information on Licenses, Certification, and Professional Memberships Held by Interview and Focus Group Participants*

-
- American Art Therapy Association (AATA)
 - American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT)
 - American Counseling Association (ACA)
 - Art Therapy Credentials Board (ATCB)
 - Association of Experiential Education (AEE)
 - Canadian Association of Cognitive Behavioural Therapies (CACBT)
 - Canadian Certified Counsellor (CCC)
 - Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA)
 - Canadian Psychological Association (CPA)
 - Chi Sigma Iota Counselling
 - College of Nurses

College of Psychologists of Ontario (CPO)
 College of Teachers
 International Society of Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IS-IPT)
 Ontario Association of Consultants, Counsellors, Psychometrists and Psychotherapists (OACCPP)
 Ontario Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (OAMFT)
 Registered Psychologist
 Registered Marriage and Family Therapist (RMFT)

Table F5. *Demographic Information on Interview and Focus Group Participants: Theoretical Orientation*

Theoretical Orientation	INT Participants [n=10]	FG Participants [n=14]
Undecided	1	0
Client-Centered/Rogerian	5	9
Solution-Focused	3	6
Family Of Origin	1	0
Systems	1	0
Emotion-Focused	2	2
Experiential	1	1
Existential	2	3
Attachment	2	0
CBT	2	10
Multi-Theoretical/Integrative	3	3
Feminist	1	0
Art Therapy	1	0
Culture-Centered Practice	1	0
Mindfulness-Based	1	2
Psychodynamic	2	1
Narrative	2	5
Collaborative/Strengths-Based	1	0
DBT	0	1
Adventure/Outdoor	0	1
Animal-Assisted	0	1
Gestalt	0	2
Transactional Analysis	0	2
Positive Psychotherapy	0	1
Constructivist Approaches	0	1
Interpersonal Psychotherapy	0	1
Relational	0	1
Motivational/Stages Of Change	0	1

58% Client-Centered/Rogerian

38% Solution-Focused

50% Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

25% Multi-Theoretical / Integrative

29% Narrative

*Appendix G**Demographic Questionnaire*

Name: _____

Code: _____

Interviewer: _____

Interview Date: _____

Thank you for agreeing to answer these questions about your counsellor training and professional status. As indicated in the Informed Consent to Participate in Research document, the data you provide here will be processed in a way that preserves your anonymity. Some closed-ended questions may assume a precision that is not possible. Feel free to jot clarification when you judge it necessary. Please try generally to keep answers short and precise.

1. What is your date of birth?
2. Which gender do you identify with?
2. What is your current professional designation?
3. Please indicate your current work setting(s): e.g. private practice, university
4. What degree(s) do you have in your current field?
5. Which professional associations do you currently hold membership with?
6. Is counselling your first career?
7. Which professional licenses do you currently hold?
8. Which title(s) do you use to identify yourself?

counsellor		conseiller/conseillère d'orientation
counseling therapist		vocational guidance counsellor
psychotherapist		marriage and family therapist
mental health therapist		orienteur
clinical counsellor		orienteur professionnel
career counsellor		psychoeducateur
Other:		

9. How would you describe your theoretical orientation to your counselling work? (eg, single or various theoretical “models” and approaches. Please name.)

*Appendix H**Comparison of Focus Groups Features*

Table H1

Comparison of Online and Offline Focus Groups

Online Focus Groups (Virtual)	Offline Focus Groups (Traditional)
Criticisms	Criticisms
Lack of non-verbal inputs Technical difficulties limit or exclude some Diminished role of moderator Imposed limits on group dynamics Typing slower than speech, fewer inputs Hard to secure equal participation Problematic behaviours: ‘lurking’, ‘dittoing’, one-liners, essays, ‘monologuing’ No assurance on identity of participant	Costly (travel logistics, set up, recording) Less time to reflect before responding Lack of convenience excludes some participants Domination or control by group member Responses limited by time constraints Participant undue influence on others (body language, tone, volume or vocabulary) Sometimes not comfortable (i.e., interrogated) Quality of recording /transcription varies
Benefits	Benefits
Access opinions of those usually not heard Offers anonymity (comfort for sharing) Text captured accurately and instantly Participant convenience (time and geographic constraints removed) Suited for exploratory/experiential research Cost effective Interactions can be slower Time for participants to reflect, edit comments All voices heard, no waiting for opening (multi-threaded conversations and posting)	Face-to-face provides non-verbal inputs Moderator can control tempo of group Able to ensure equal participation Can track focus of participants and adjust Lively attendance (person not just text) Confirmation of identity (may be requirement) Level of commitment/obligation higher due to physical presence

Sources: Clarke, 2000; Edmunds, 1999; Greenbaum, 1997; Hughes & Lang, 2004; Johnson, 1996; Ruhleder, 2000; Schneider, Kerwin, Frechtling & Vivari, 2002; Sinickas, 2001; Stewart & Williams, 2005; Tates, Zwaanswijk, Otten, Van Dulmen, Hoogerbrugge, Kamps, & Bensing, 2009; Wegerif, 1996.

Table H2

Comparison of Asynchronous and Synchronous Focus Groups

Asynchronous Focus Groups	Synchronous Focus Groups
<p style="text-align: center;">Criticisms</p> <p>Appropriate duration hard to determine, some negative impact (loss of interest if too long, too short not enough flexibility) Not as ‘experientially real’ as live groups (i.e., usually do not include sound and graphical images more text-based)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Criticisms</p> <p>Chat text speed /volume challenge for moderator (read/reflect/respond) Participant numbers need to be limited (i.e., management challenges); smaller participant numbers reduces diversity of views Liveliness /intensity generates multiple conversations; sometimes jumbled, overlapping of threaded conversations Comments and discussion more spontaneous, less time to reflect/shape thoughts</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Benefits</p> <p>Participant numbers larger, easier to manage Slower pace allows more reflection time, richer depth of response Atmosphere devoid of time pressures (i.e., lower intensity of exchange/text speed) Responses can be lengthier, chance to amend or enhance input More time for exchange of different perspectives (i.e., open and emergent process)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Benefits</p> <p>Use of ‘work arounds’ (i.e., emoticons, typographic cues, acronyms) can reproduce intensity of face-to-face Text and graphical interaction in real-time (i.e., ‘temporal co-presence’) augments discussion Greater sense of immediacy creates emotional intensity and vibrant atmosphere Communication more ‘oral’; makes it like spoken dialogue (some use of phatics, e.g., ‘gee’ or ‘lol’)</p>

Sources: Clarke, 2000; Edmunds, 1999; Greenbaum, 1997; Hughes & Lang, 2004; Johnson, 1996; Ruhleder, 2000; Schneider, Kerwin, Frechtling & Vivari, 2002; Sinickas, 2001; Stewart & Williams, 2005; Tates, Zwaanswijk, Otten, Van Dulmen, Hoogerbrugge, Kamps, & Bensing, 2009; Wegerif, 1996.

*Appendix I**Focus Group Discussion Forum*

Content Folders

- Home Page
- Daily Update
- Confidentiality
- Getting Started
- Posting
- Procedural Outline
- Discussion Board

Home Page

Course Name: CS-000037 Gazzola-Gignac

Dates: April 16-29/2013

Daily UpdateOverview of the Focus Group DiscussionsSense of Counsellor Professional Identity

Day 1 – three questions

Day 2 – two questions

Day 3 – two questions

Day 4 – two questions

Constructing & Communicating Counsellor Professional Identity

Day 5 – two questions

Day 6 – three questions

Day 7 – two questions

Day 8 - one question and response to a diagram

Negotiating Counsellor Identity Amid Change Context

Day 9 – three questions

Day 10 – two questions

Day 11 – two questions

Day 12 – three questions

Day 13 – three questions

Day 14 – proposing a metaphor and reflecting on themes – concluding thoughts

Confidentiality

You are asked to respect the confidentiality of fellow participants by agreeing that what is said in the focus group stays in the focus group. Disclose what you feel comfortable with during the focus group discussions of a personal or identifying nature but please be aware that this will only be altered at the publication level to ensure confidentiality.

Getting Started

- ***Logging on to Blackboard Learn***

To access Blackboard Learn you will need to go to:

<https://maestro.uottawa.ca/index.asp?LANG=EN>

Go to the centre section of the Virtual Campus homepage under the Blackboard Learn banner and enter your user ID and password in the box above the maroon Login button then click on the access button.

- ***Technical Support Contact Information***

Go to the main login page at <https://maestro.uottawa.ca/indexEN.asp>

Submit your request for technical support by clicking on the **Support Form** link (Select Blackboard/Virtual Campus from subject menu) and they will respond to your inquiry promptly.

Or by calling the **Centre for Mediated Teaching and Learning** 613-562-5800 ext: 6555

Posting and Anonymity – *For your consideration*

Anonymity in the focus group discussion is your choice and responsibility so please take time to consider which option you are most comfortable with.

If you prefer to post your responses to questions and other participant's comments anonymously you must check this option box* before posting your reply.

If you choose not to activate this option your responses will by default appear as posts under your full name like this: Kate Gignac

Here are the steps for posting a reply:

1. Open the Discussion Board and then click on the day's focus group discussion which will be highlighted in blue (e.g. Day 1)
2. This will bring you to the questions for that day where you can post your reply by clicking on the question
3. A Message box will appear where you can type in your reply

4. *Directly below the Message section there is a box that reads - *Post Message as Anonymous* - remember to check this if you want to post anonymously

Procedural Outline

Timeframes: Daily Discussion and Posting Process

Daily Questions

Each of the days, one through to fourteen, there will be 2-3 questions posted that you are invited to offer your response to.

As other focus group participants post their responses you are encouraged to comment on anything that someone else has said or perhaps add further insights.

Response Timeframe

Each day at 6:00 am the day's questions will be posted and will remain active till 12 midnight that same day.

At midnight each day the questions and threaded discussion of that day will become inactive, meaning no further posting will be permitted.

Role of the E-Moderator

I will be moderating the web space during the day at regular intervals and actively encouraging group discussion by posting additional questions to clarify views or foster ongoing dialogue.

Discussion Board

Note. This represents the Focus Group Discussion Forum content as it appeared on the Blackboard Learn web page.

Appendix J

Focus Group Discussion Guide

Welcome to Day ____

Here are today's focus group questions which ask about:

Sense of Counsellor Professional Identity

Day 1 – three questions

Day 2 – two questions

Day 3 – two questions

Day 4 – two questions

Constructing & Communicating Counsellor Professional Identity

Day 5 – two questions

Day 6 – three questions

Day 7 – two questions

Day 8 - one question and response to a diagram

Negotiating Counsellor Identity Amid Change Context

Day 9 – three questions

Day 10 – two questions

Day 11 – two questions

Day 12 – three questions

Day 13 – three questions

Day 14 – metaphor request and response to themes; concluding thoughts

Please post your responses to the discussion questions and be sure to offer responses to postings from other focus group participants at some point during the day as well.

Posting Date & #	Questions
1	When did you first begin to think about being a counsellor? How long have you been a counsellor and have any other careers come before this? What do you feel has influenced your sense of counsellor professional identity thus far?
2	What comes to mind when you think of someone who is a professional counsellor? How do others know you are a counsellor?
3	Recount a moment when you felt a profound sense of being a counsellor – what was going on that made you identify with your profession? How important is it to have a sense of belonging with the overall profession of counselling?
4	What do you think makes counsellors unique? If we were to meet in five years, what might you tell me about yourself as a professional counsellor?
5	If you were asked to develop a blueprint on how to construct your professional identity as a counsellor what would it include? What are some of the resources that help you build your professional identity?
6	If you were to identify what strengthens your counsellor identity what comes to

		<p>mind first?</p> <p>What are some of the challenges or barriers that you encounter day-to-day that might diminish your status or confidence as a professional counsellor?</p> <p>When would you consider your professional identity solidified or do you feel constructing a professional identity is a life long project?</p>
	7	<p>What role do you play in navigating or shaping your professional identity as a counsellor and how are professional associations or your workplace environment involved in this process?</p> <p>What identity markers, such as outward appearance, professional demeanour or other norms of behavior, tell others you are a professional counsellor?</p>
	8	<p>Diagram Response</p> <p><i>Preamble: From the data gathered so far in this study a number of themes and connections have been identified. This sketch is a preliminary attempt to summarize the evolving portrait of counsellor professional identity construction in a diagram. It is meant to be an evocative visual stimulus that inspires contemplation and encourages insights from you about the image, content, and design. Understanding how this diagram resonates with you will help me to improve the accuracy of my interpretations at this point in the data analysis. As such, I welcome your suggestions on what is represented here and also what you think might be missing.</i></p> <p>What would be the most effective way for you to portray or tell the story of how your professional identity is unfolding to another counsellor, your supervisor, or perhaps just to yourself?</p> <p>[e.g., a narrative piece be it a blog or journal, self-reflection practice, through some art medium, or some other form]</p>
	9	<p>Thinking back, can you tell me about any critical incidents or precipitating events that have shaped your professional identity as a counsellor?</p> <p>Would you describe this as an empowering/hindering experience?</p> <p>Were you aware it was happening, how did you know, what did you do and what were some of the feelings at the time?</p>
	10	<p>When you think about other counsellor professional identity transitions you have experienced like going from student to novice counsellor or perhaps counsellor to supervisor – I am wondering how you found these change events ...energizing, distracting, natural, or unsettling?</p> <p>How do you decide which components of your counsellor identity to modify, augment, solidify, redefine, or perhaps even let go of when these kinds of transitions occur? (components could be things like self-definition, skills, knowledge, demeanour, attitudes, or any other elements that are unique to your professional identity)</p>
	11	<p>I would like to talk a bit now about the current move in Ontario to regulate mental health professionals and how you are continuing to shape your counsellor identity amid these ongoing changes. Perhaps if you can start by sharing with me what bearing this is having on you as a counsellor and where you see yourself in relation to the newly appointed College of Psychotherapists and Registered Mental Health Therapists of Ontario?</p> <p>Where do you see yourself as a counsellor in relation to the proposed title(s) for registration?</p>
	12	<p>As a counsellor in Ontario, are you able to continue your identity construction work in the midst of the current uncertainty as details are sorted out?</p>

		<p>What have you found helpful and what have been some of the challenges so far during this period of uncertainty?</p> <p>How would you describe the approach you are adopting as you negotiate these changes? [Wait and see? Pro-active? Disengaged?]</p>
	13	<p>As you consider the ongoing work of your identity construction in the next while do you envision having to make incremental refinements or perhaps more significant modifications to who you are as a counsellor given the proposed regulatory changes?</p> <p>How likely is it that you would consider abandoning the trajectory you have set for continuing as a professional counsellor?</p> <p>Would you see the need for a provisional identity – one that bridges the existing one with the anticipated one – at this point? Can you describe the attributes or characteristics of this tentative identity and what would you do to reconcile this one with your current counsellor identity?</p>
	14	<p>Metaphor Request</p> <p><i>Preamble: Is there a metaphor that speaks to how you are negotiating your counsellor professional identity amid the current change context?</i></p> <p><i>Metaphors allow us to draw comparisons between two things that are for the most part not alike yet can be considered similar in one important way. Sometimes they can make experiences more meaningful or lucid by transferring the more abstract elements into something concrete.</i></p> <p><i>I invite you to take a few minutes to reflect on any images, mythical stories, symbols, prose, musical lyrics, or archetypes that help you to isolate either a single or series of metaphors that describe your identity construction process and how you are negotiating your professional identity in the midst of the current changes.</i></p> <p>Reflection & Response to Themes</p> <p><i>Preamble: These are a few of the themes that have surfaced so far in the research study. Do any of these resonate with your experience of negotiating, constructing, and communicating your counsellor professional identity? I am also interested in what you feel might be missing?</i></p> <p>Thank you and closing remarks</p>

Appendix K

Focus Group Recruitment Letter



uOttawa

Faculté d'éducation
Faculty of Education

**Counsellors Negotiating Professional Identity in the Midst of Exogenous Change:
A Case Study**

Kate Gignac (PhD Candidate)
Dr. Nick Gazzola (Thesis Supervisor)

Fellow counsellors,

I am interested in understanding your sense of counsellor identity and how you are currently going about the work of shaping your professional self-image. As a counsellor-in-training, novice or experienced counsellor in Ontario you may be aware that changes are taking place in the landscape of mental health services in this province which will impact counselling and psychotherapy practice. The purpose of this study is to understand how counsellors like you are constructing, reworking, or maintaining their professional identity amid these changes and to provide a descriptive, meaningful account of this experience. Your participation will contribute to the completion of my Ph.D. thesis in Educational Counselling at the University of Ottawa and extend the discussion on the professional identity of counsellors in Canada.

For the purpose of this study a counsellor is a professional holding, or in the process of completing a Master's degree in counselling or some related field where a supervised practicum is required. Counsellors who hold a national credential as a Canadian Certified Counsellor or belong to other certification and licensing bodies that have equivalent credentialing requirements will be considered for inclusion. Anticipated study participants will consist of: students (currently enrolled in counsellor training programs), novice counsellors (within first 5 years post-master's degree), and experienced counsellors (more than 5 years) including counsellor educators.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to fill out a brief demographic questionnaire (which will take no more than 10 minutes) prior to joining the online focus group discussion. You will then be invited to take part in an online focus group using an asynchronous mode – it will not be in real time. The focus group discussion will be hosted on a Blackboard Learn web space (a WebCT learning management system) and you will be asked to respond to a series of semi-structured questions and visual models posted by the researcher. As a focus group participant, you will have 24 hour access to the group discussion board over a two week period [occurring between March 1, 2013 and April 30, 2013] where you will be able to anonymously post your responses to questions and other participant's comments. The focus group provides an opportunity for individual views to be part of a collaborative dialogue on professional identity. Your anonymity will be protected in any written accounts of the research and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. Recruitment will be done by Kate Gignac the principal investigator and interviewer. This research project and the online procedural

process have received approval by the University of Ottawa, Office of Research Ethics and Integrity. The thesis supervisor is Dr. Nick Gazzola, email: gazzola@uottawa.ca.

Please contact me **Kate Gignac** at [redacted] if you are interested in participating in the study and I will be happy to share more details with you. I look forward to hearing your thoughts on counsellor professional identity.

*Appendix L**Focus Group Consent Form*

Consent to Participate in Research (Focus Group)

This consent form (a copy of which has been given to you) is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, feel free to consult further with Kate Gignac, at or with Nick Gazzola, at 562-5800, ext. 4030, email: gazzola@uottawa.ca. This study is part of the completion of a Ph.D. thesis titled “Counsellors negotiating professional identity in the midst of exogenous change: A case study” by Kate Gignac. The thesis supervisor is Dr. Nick Gazzola. Please take time to read this carefully.

1. Purpose:

The objective of this project is to examine how counsellors working in Ontario construct their professional identity. Specifically, the goal is to understand how individual counsellors are negotiating and shaping their professional identity during current changes to the regulation of mental health professionals within the province. Your participation in this study will be an important part of meeting these objectives and may contribute to your own understanding of counsellor professional identity.

2. Procedures:

If you agree to participate in this study you will be taking part in an online focus group using an asynchronous mode, meaning it is not in real time. A sponsored account with limited-time access will be set up by the University of Ottawa, Computing and Communication Services through the secure university server in order to allow you to access the Blackboard Learn (a WebCT learning management system) web space where the focus group discussion will be hosted. The following information will be needed to set up your user account: your full name, date-of-birth, and email address. Technical management of the Blackboard web space will be overseen by the University of Ottawa, Teaching and Learning Support Services in conjunction with the primary researcher and thesis supervisor. Both of these services and their staff are subject to the security and privacy policies of the University of Ottawa and the procedural process has met with the requirements for conduct set out by the university’s Office of Research Ethics and Integrity.

You will be asked to fill out a brief demographic questionnaire (approximately 10 minutes) that will be mailed to you along with the consent form prior to the commencement of the online focus group. As a focus group participant, you will have 24 hour access to the group discussion board over a two week period [occurring between March 1, 2013 and April 30, 2013] where you will be able to anonymously post your responses to questions and other participant's comments. The web space will be moderated by the primary researcher who will be posting questions and visual models for feedback and actively encouraging group discussion by asking additional questions to clarify participant's views when helpful, and regularly checking the postings. You are asked to respect the confidentiality of fellow participants by agreeing that what is said in the focus group stays in the focus group. Disclose what you feel comfortable with during the focus group discussions of a personal or identifying nature but please be aware that this will only be altered at the publication level to ensure confidentiality.

The text-based data from the focus group will be downloaded from Blackboard Learn by Teaching and Learning Support Services to a data file and given to the primary researcher and their thesis supervisor (Nick Gazzola) once the focus group has been completed. Following this, the Blackboard Learn database holding the focus group information (participant contact information and verbatim text) will be deleted. The verbatim text from the focus group discussion will be coded by the primary researcher and one expert in the field of counselling and psychotherapy will be consulted to ensure quality coding. Be assured that coders and transcribers, as well as outside consultants will be bound by a code of ethics that regulates counseling professional conduct relating to all matters in the conduct of research, including confidentiality. Moreover, all information will be treated as private and confidential even after identifying features have been removed. The code keys will be stored in a reference file separate from the data set. All of the coded data will be kept for ten years and be destroyed by the end of 2021 and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

The results of this study may be presented at research conferences or published in scholarly journals. Participants may be quoted but their identities will be safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms. In all matters regarding the communication of results, your anonymity will in no way be compromised. Once completed, the results of the investigation will be made available to you upon request.

If you would like information about the ethical conduct of the project, or would like to express concerns, contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research:

Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research
Research Grants and Ethics Services, University of Ottawa
Tabaret Hall, Room 154
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5
Tel: (613) 562-5387
E-Mail: ethics@uottawa.ca

3. Conditions of participation:

- I understand the purpose of this study and how much time it entails, and that during the research process I may learn more about myself and counsellor professional identity.
- I understand that participating in this study is entirely voluntary.
- I understand how confidentiality will be maintained during this project.
- I understand the anticipated uses of the data and that publication and communication of results will be done in such a way as to ensure that all participants will remain anonymous.

Your signature on this form indicates you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this research and agree to participate in this research. In no way does this waive your legal rights and it also does not release anyone involved with the research from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact:

Kate Gignac at

Or

Nick Gazzola, Ph.D.
Faculty of Education
University of Ottawa
Tel: (613) 562-5800, ext. 4030
E-Mail: gazzola@uottawa.ca

Participant's Name (please print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Interviewer's Signature: _____

Date: _____

*Appendix M**Basic and Organizing Themes – Sample Analysis*

Basic Themes: Sample Participant

1. Academic trajectory steered toward counselling field
2. Idea to pursue counselling career gathered momentum during work study and internships
3. Pursuit of doctoral studies and work constraints impede realization of counsellor identity
4. Desire to be in helping professions led to crystallization of counsellor identity
5. Workplace setting influenced counsellor identity
6. Having a mental image /model of what a counsellor is assisted with identity shaping
7. Professional self-image solidified during internship
8. Professional identity based on a vision – your goals and desires
9. Professional identity shaped by education / training
10. Professional identity related to the job itself
11. Factors that define professional identity can work together to strengthen or create disruptive tension
12. Counsellor identity involves a distinct way / perspective for helping people deal with life challenges
13. ‘Professional counsellor’ not a designation, more a way of working
14. Accreditation is a requisite for being identified as a professional
15. Professional regulation not personally important to me as a counsellor
16. Credentialing important for referrals and documentation of client work
17. Visual qualifiers indicating professional credentials (i.e., acronyms, degrees) useful but not essential
18. Professional identity communicated through work ethic and ability to communicate competently [written and verbal]
19. Critical incidents and precipitating events can refine/test counsellor identity
20. Able to actualize personal values associated with helping others by becoming a counsellor
21. Switch in academic direction required amendment to counsellor identity
22. Professional redesign [going from practitioner to researcher] diminished counsellor identity
23. Shift in perspective/mindset triggers re-negotiation of counsellor identity
24. Not having a strong sense of counsellor identity increased self-doubt and feeling of incompetence
25. A sense of loss / sadness when professional identity is severely altered or eliminated
26. Counsellor identity is situated in self-concept
27. Researcher and practitioner identities inform one another
28. Mentors and internship supervisors instrumental resource during identity work
29. Program of study not contributing factor in identity shaping
30. Transferring counselling knowledge into practice supported identity process
31. Professional identity in continual process of shaping and refinement
32. Transitioning to new identity disturbs sense of security
33. During identity transition degrees of awareness and self-reflection
34. Counsellor identity shaped by layers of growth [transitions]
35. Counsellor identity is tangible manifestation of values and life experiences
36. Other identities create negative tension for counsellor identity
37. Regulatory requirements unrealistic, onerous, and filled with unknowns
38. Certification more important for interns [less concern with regulation]
39. Regulation stirs up doubts about professional competence
40. Registered titles not suitable and unsure where counsellors belong
41. Counsellor trained in master’s of educational counselling not same as a psychotherapist
42. Title of counsellor often preceded by a descriptor [e.g. career counsellor, academic counsellor]
43. Word or title ‘counsellor’ used to label a specific job and role

44. Psychotherapist title stands alone – no descriptors
 45. No need for qualifiers [e.g., certified, professional] with counsellor title
 46. Underlying philosophy is educational [a counsellor is someone who is a true educational counsellor]
 47. Challenge of holding multiple identities and reconciling discrepancies day-to-day
 48. Counsellor identity is enduring, has a perceived core
 49. Suspending counsellor identity for alternate one not a dilemma [just dimming, removed from spotlight temporarily]
-

Organizing Themes:

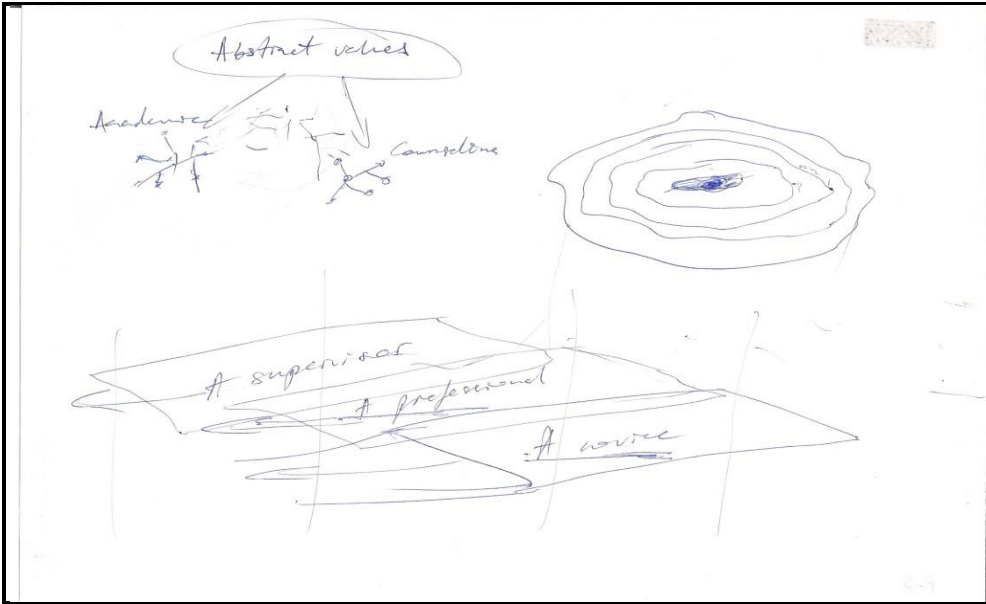
I.	Academic pursuits guide, influence and challenge identity [1,2,3,9,21,22,23,27]
II.	Counsellor title often needs differentiation [41,42,44,45]
III.	Identity of a counsellor – defining elements and formative processes [6,11,12,13,24,26,31,46,47,48]
IV.	A way to actualize personal values, purpose and desire to help others [4,8,20,35]
V.	Counsellor identity linked to job/workplace setting [5,10,43]
VI.	Credentialing and professional regulation challenges [14,15,16,17,37,38,39,40]
VII.	Identity transitions and ensuing tensions [7,19,25,32,33,34,36,49]
VIII.	Identity resources and contributing factors [18,28,29,30]

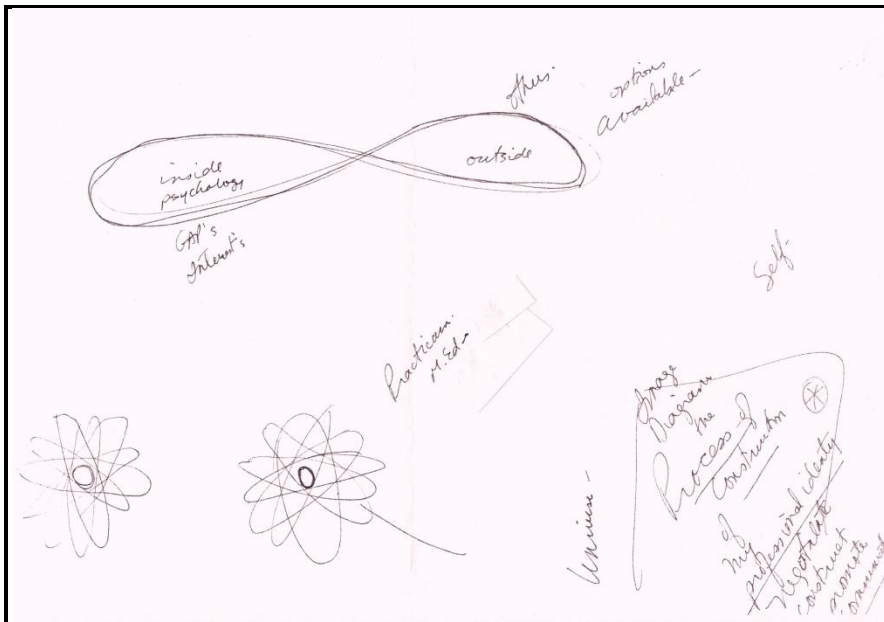
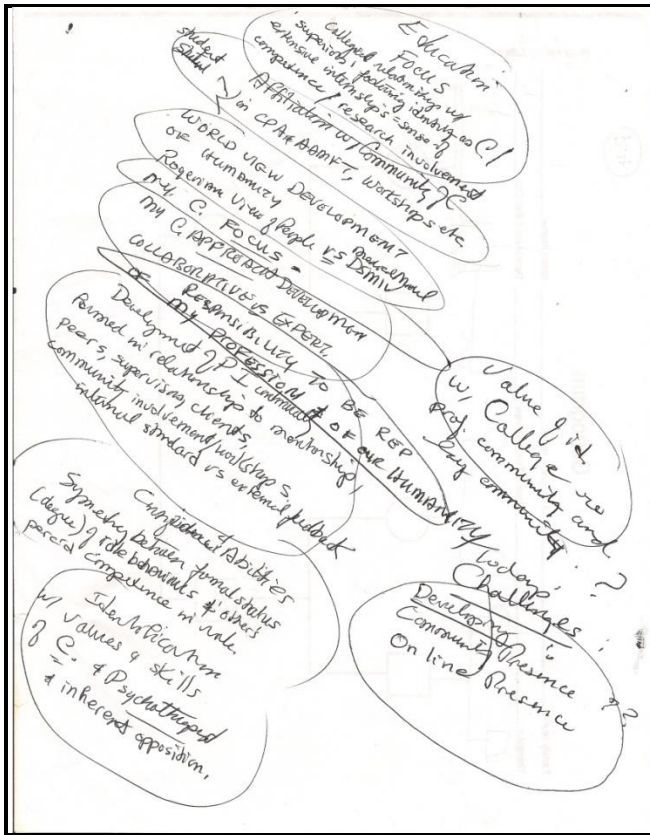
Note. The Basic Themes that are associated with each of these Organizing Themes are itemized in the brackets.

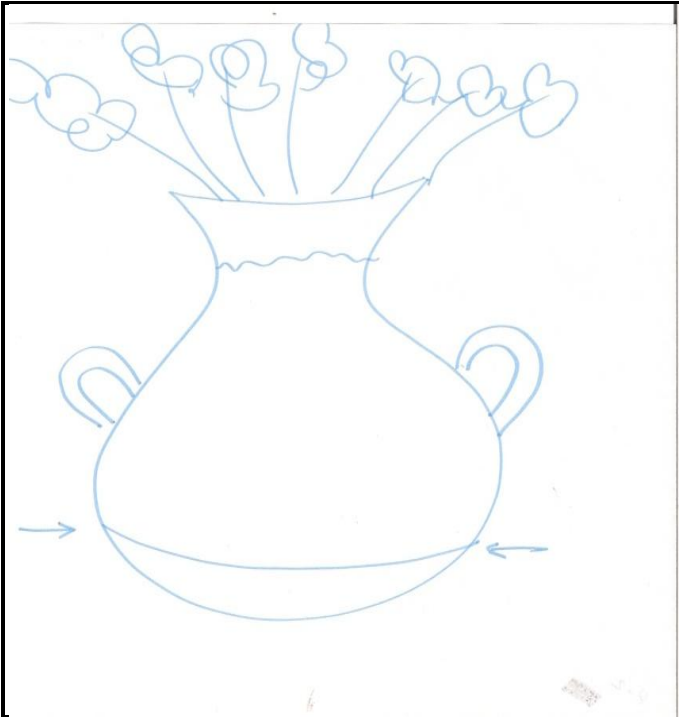
Appendix N

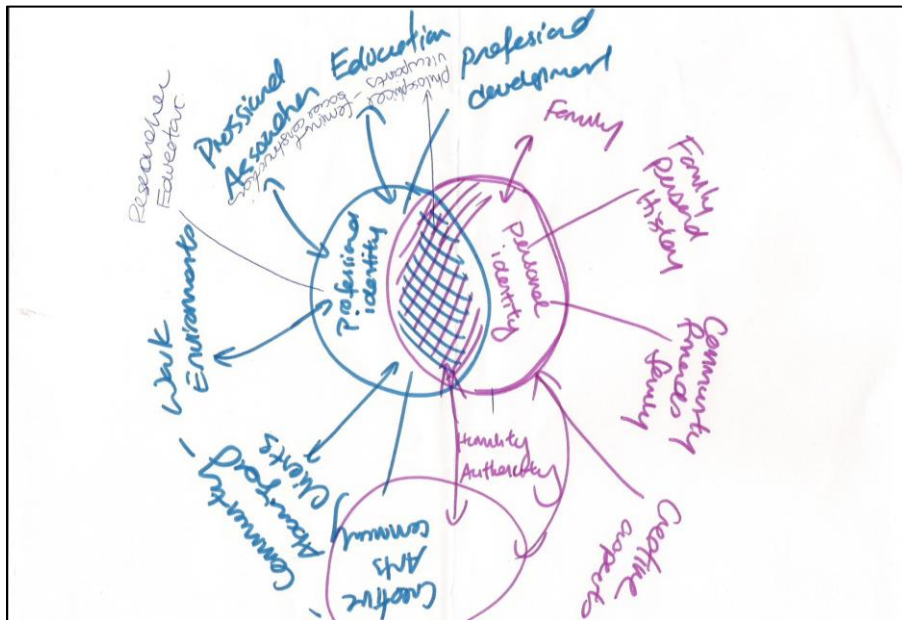
Participant Diagrams

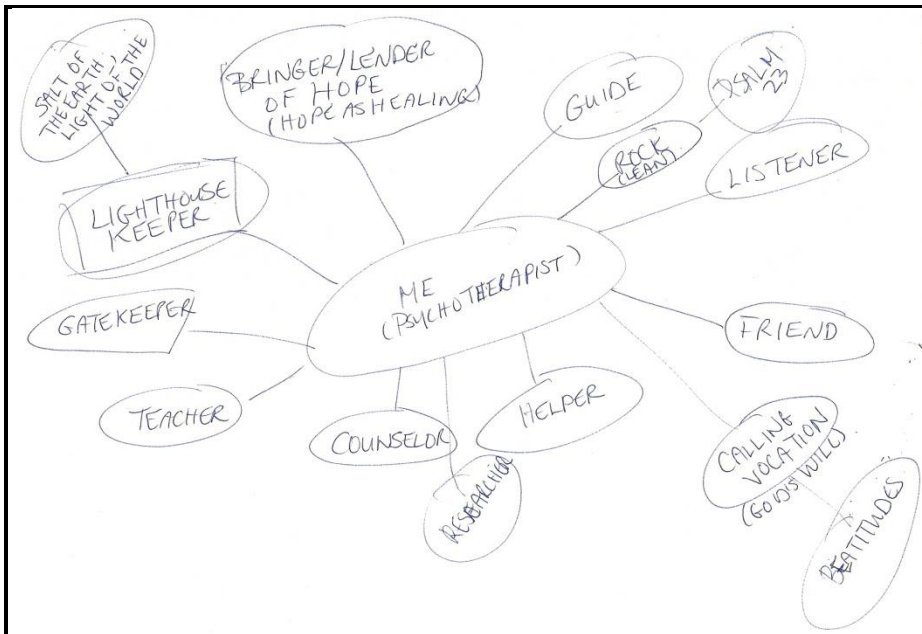
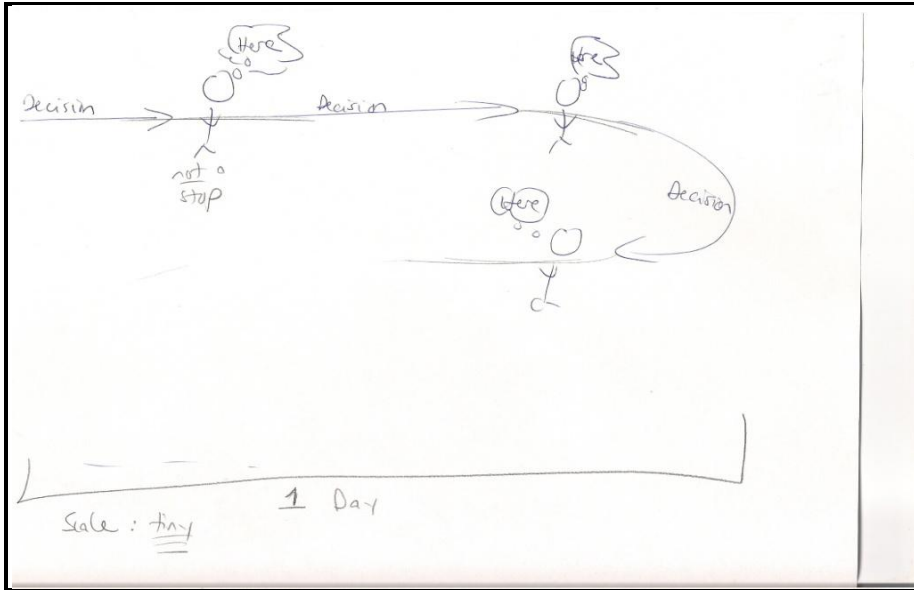
Diagrams of interview participants:

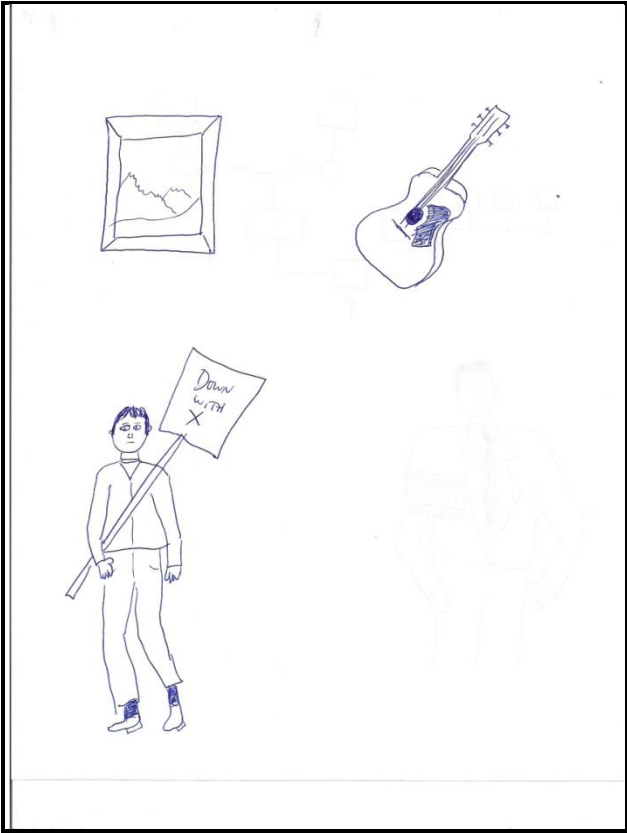
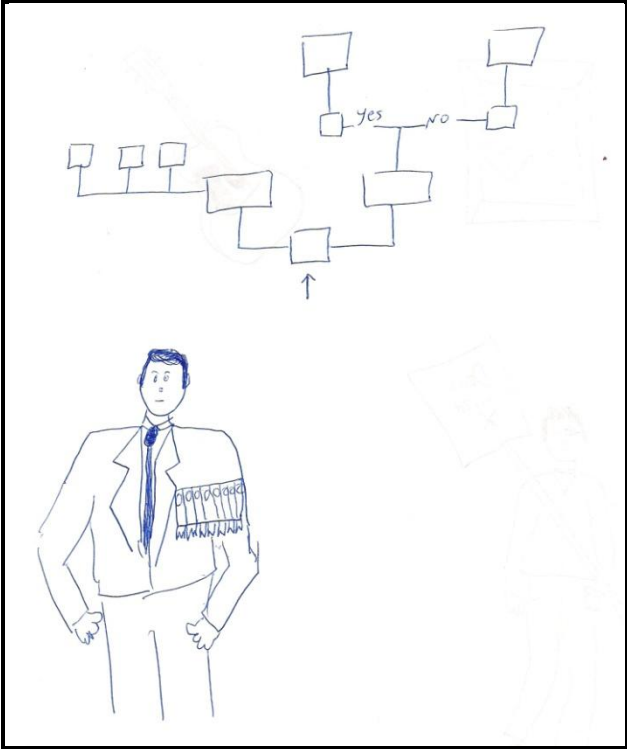










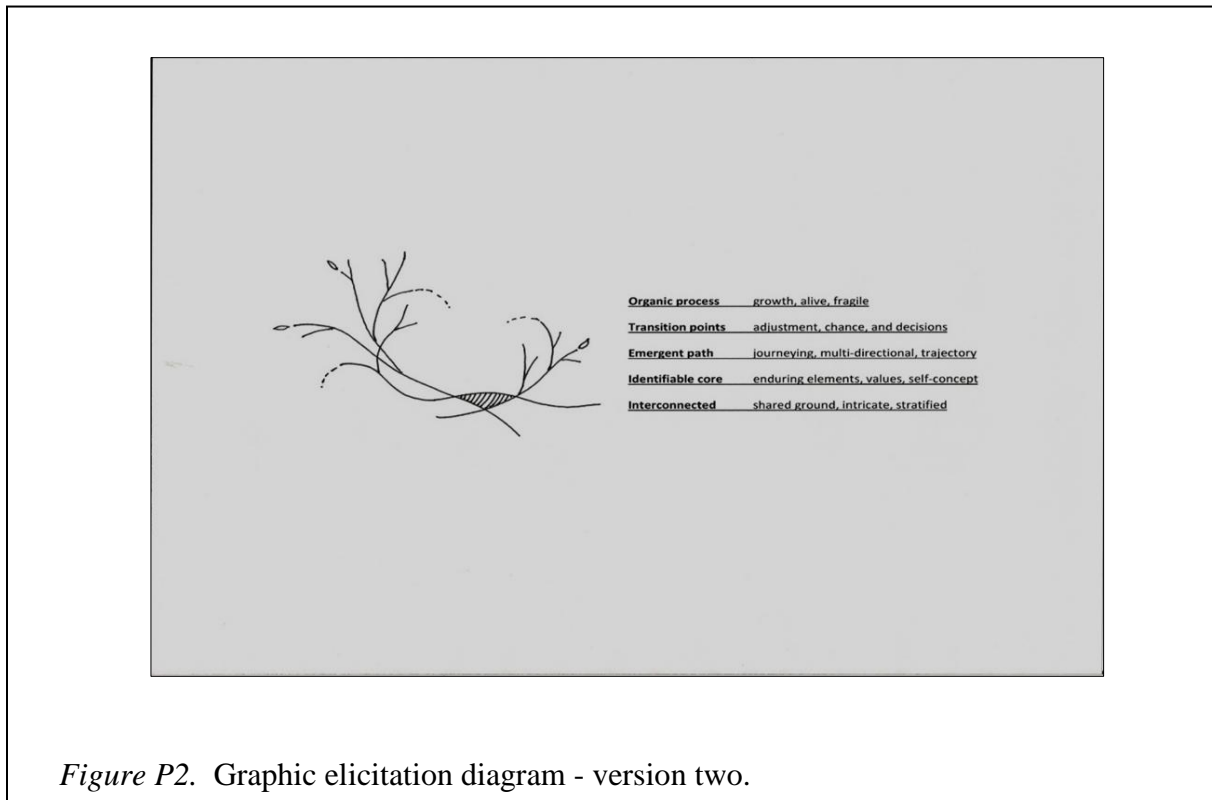
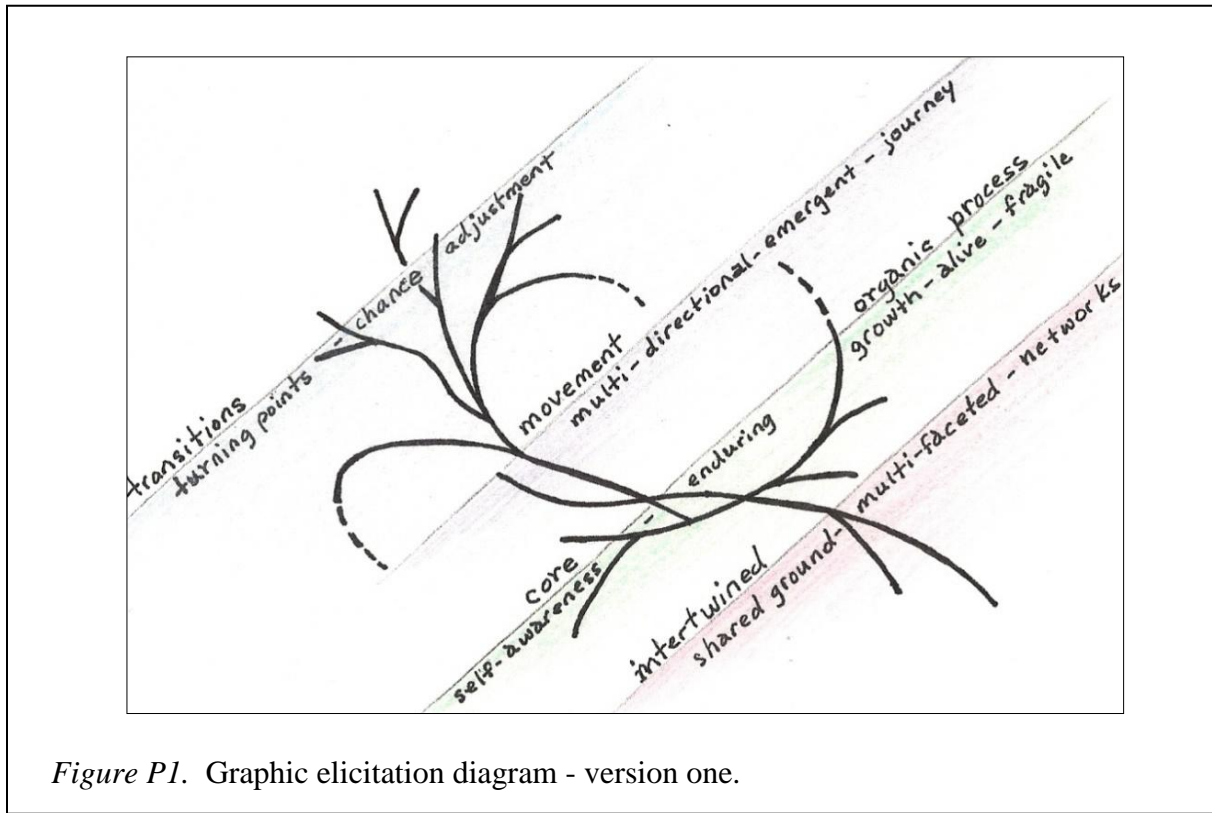


*Appendix O**Participant Metaphors*

- Puzzle pieces jumbled in a bag
- Constructing and shaping a ceramic vase
- Being at a sport field while an event is unfolding
- Ebb and flow of the tide
- Flow of a mobius band
- Moulding 'green clay'
- Intertwining of a double-stranded organic spiral (gas, fluid, solid)
- Putting on of hats
- Tornadoes, whirlpools, and fireworks – energy and turbulence
- The theatre and being on the stage
- Soup making
- Climbing a mountain
- Star Trek voyage
- Darwinian evolution
- Finding an opening in the woods
- Moving from stagnation to crystallization
- Growing a tree
- Being on a journey
- Wine making

Appendix P

Graphic Elicitation Diagrams – Versions One and Two

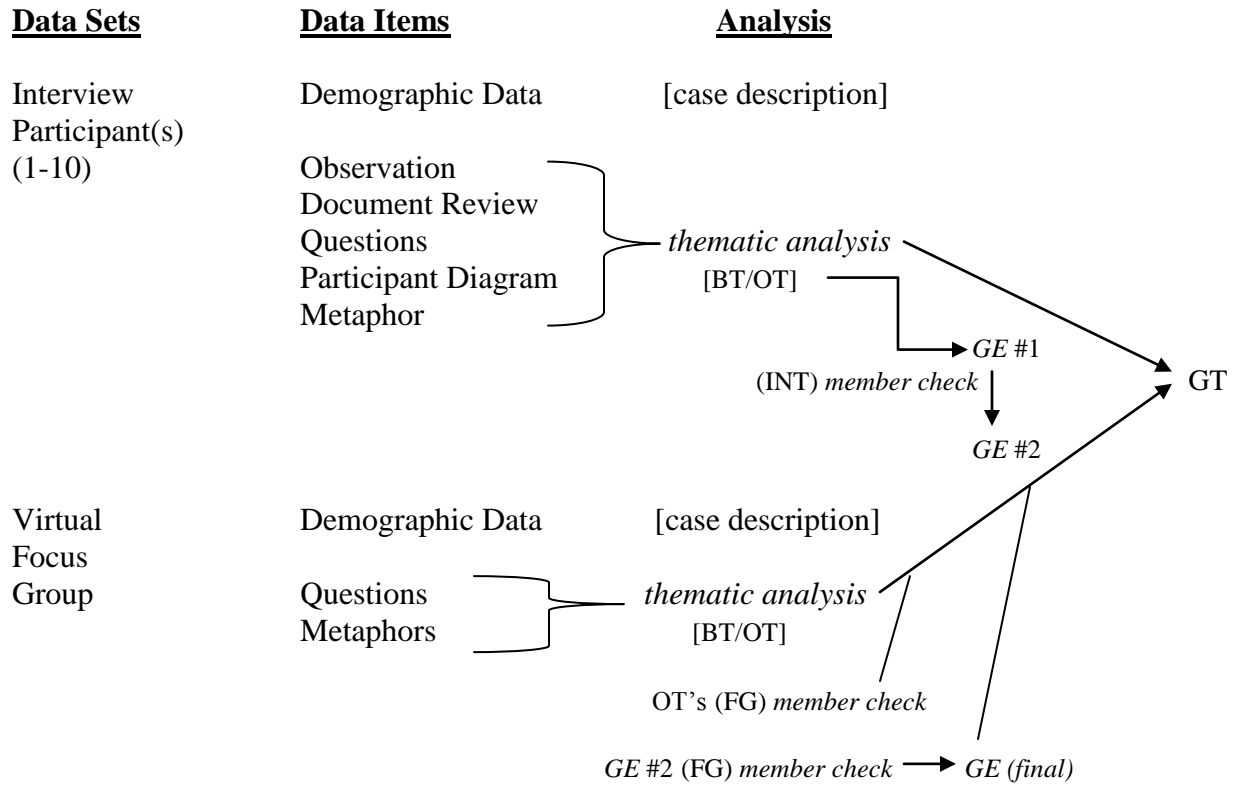


*Appendix Q**Documents Submitted for Review*

- Artistic and inspirational posters
- Screen saver
- Email correspondence
- Professional Web page
- Curriculum Vitae
- Reflection document on professional identity
- Academic paper on professional journey
- Workshop poster
- Peer-reviewed article
- PPT Presentation on counsellor professional values/worldview
- List of key books
- Pamphlet for counselling chapter

Appendix R

Thematic Analysis Map



Legend:

Levels of Thematic Analysis

BT = Basic Themes

OT= Organizing Themes

GT=Global Themes

GE= Graphic Elicitation Diagram

(1, 2, and final version)