

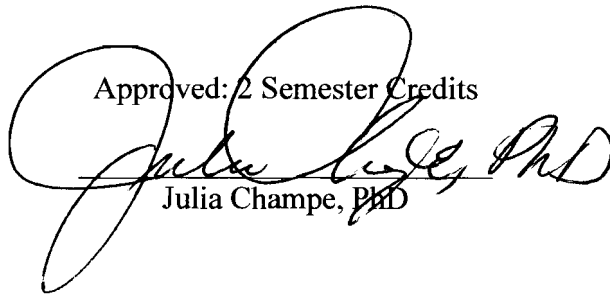
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING  
INTERNS AS THEY TRANSITION FROM STUDENTS  
TO PROFESSIONALS

by

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A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Julia Champe, PhD', is written over the printed name. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the beginning and end.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experience of master's-level mental health counseling students as they transition to professional counselors. What does the transition from student to professional counselor mean for counseling interns? What are their thoughts and feelings connected to this moment in time? The research regarding counselor identity describes themes and proposes counselor identity models of development; however there is little research that speaks to the meaning of the student's experience of becoming a counselor. A phenomenological methodology was used to explore the meaning that the transition from student to professional counselor had for three last semester counseling interns. Data analysis involved looking for similar and distinct themes in the participants' stories from which one main theme and three sub-themes emerged. The main theme was *Professionalism* with three sub-themes: *Shaping the professional*, *Practicing professionalism* and *Emerging professional*.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Learning to be a counselor is a journey. This journey to become a counselor is filled with much ambiguity at times; however in the end, hopefully, the result is a better understanding of one's self. What does it mean to become a counselor? When does a student feel like a counselor? In Samuel Gladding's words,

“We all begin our journey to be counselors as people who are seeking a purpose greater than ourselves and for the benefit of others. In the process, we often find a new awareness of who we are, what we can and should do. Our progress of becoming is a paradox at times. The more we let go of the roles that have confined us, the greater freedom we have.” (2002, p. 2).

Mental health counseling students change while going through their graduate program (Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2003, Hazler & Kottler, 2005, Nelson & Jackson (2003), Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Several authors describe students as becoming different people compared to when they first start a counseling program because numerous personal issues regarding values, worldview, relationships, attitudes and beliefs are attended to during the course of a counselor training program (Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2003, Hazler & Kottler, 2005, Nelson & Jackson (2003), Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

### *Statement of Research Problem*

What does the transition from student to professional counselor mean for mental health counseling students? What are their thoughts and feelings connected to this particular moment in time for counseling students? What does it mean to students to become a counselor? Finally, what if any experiences have aided them as they begin the

transition from student to professional counselor? The research regarding counselor identity describes themes and proposes counselor identity models of development; however there is little research that speaks to the meaning of the counseling student's experience of becoming a counselor. If counselor educators are to aid in the professional development of counselors in training, then there is a need for research that speaks to a supervisees' actual experience (Borders, 1989).

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore what the experience is for mental health counseling master's students as they transition to professional counselors. What are their thoughts and feelings during the transition? While there is counseling literature based upon theory and observation that describes the experience of mental health counseling students, there is not an abundance of research describing thoughts and feelings of counseling students. Borders (1989, p. 17) states, "There is a need for descriptions of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of supervisees at various developmental stages". Counseling students go through a process of individuation during their program; however there is not a lot of research that demonstrates how students progress through this process to develop counseling identities (Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2003).

### *Assumptions*

I chose to conduct qualitative research to understand the experience of master's-level mental health counseling students as they transition from student to professional counselor. The assumption is, however, that a transition takes place. Transition theory assumes that many transitions are to be anticipated in the life course of an individual

(White, 2005) and some research has described this transition for therapists and counselors (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

This study will attempt to explore what the experience of the student is as he/she transitions to a professional counselor, and what meaning is attached to this period of time in a counseling student's life.



## Chapter II: Literature Review

Several authors describe that a number of factors intersect, some not fully understood, that transform students into counselors; and contend that becoming a counselor is a process of development (Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2003; Borders, 1989; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). However, what is it that happens for students? Literature regarding the process of becoming a counselor speaks of developing a counseling identity (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). What does it mean to develop a counselor identity? One plausible theory found in the literature is that counseling identities are developed through a process of individuation (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). This process spans the lifetime for a practitioner. In addition to what happens in the lifetime of a practitioner, there are other studies that characterize what beginning the process of individuation is like for counseling students (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2003). Literature regarding this process attempts to explain mental health counseling students' progress through an individuation process and what types of characteristics typify this period of time for students (Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2003).

Characteristics of beginning supervisees can be described as “black-and-white thinking, linear problem solving, and little self awareness” (Borders, 1989, p. 163). Supervisees also tend to rely a great deal on supervisors telling them the correct way to do counseling, and are very self critical of their work and progress. Counselors' self-conceptualizations provide a structure to carry out professional responsibilities (Brott & Myers, 1999, p. 443). Self conceptualizations can be described as “personal guidelines” that provide a “meaning-making framework” used when acting in the role of counselor (Brott & Myers, 1999, p. 443). Unlike other professions, graduate students in counseling

programs emerge with an understanding of professional self, but also a greater understanding of personal self (Auxier, Hughes, and Kline, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

Counseling identities are developed through a process of individuation (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2003). The individuation process is “an increasingly higher order integration of the professional self and the personal self”(Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, p. 510) with the result being “an optimal therapeutic self that consists of a unique personal blend of the developed professional and personal selves” (p. 509). Skovholt and Ronnestad found that in some circumstances individuation can be described as successful separation; however in their study the individuation process was “saturated with relationships,” relationships with clients, peers, professional elders, family and friends (1992, p 509).

Many students go through a phase in which the “gulf widens between professional and personal functioning (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, p. 510). Professional functioning is driven more by external methods, and less by personal functioning. External methods include: difficult exams, professional socialization, internships and licensing requirements. In Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s study, one female student described the experience like this, “At times I was so busy thinking about the instructions given in class and textbooks, I barely heard the client” (p. 510). For students the process of counselor identity development does not have a final outcome, rather it is a process that spans a practitioner’s life time (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Brott & Myers, 1999).

### *Themes and Counselor Identity Development in Students*

Professional growth and development for counselors in training is a process that begins with acceptance into a graduate program (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Several studies have been conducted in an effort to understand the developmental process of counseling interns. It is from research that themes have emerged regarding common characteristics among counseling interns.

Nelson and Jackson (2004) conducted qualitative research in an attempt to explore the concept of counselor identity development for Hispanic counseling interns. They found three themes that were consistent with previous literature regarding counselor identity development, and were not influenced by cultural issues. The three themes were a) knowledge b) personal growth and c) experiential learning. Furr and Carroll (2003) studied counselor development by asking counseling interns in a master's degree program to report critical incidents that had defined their development as counselors. Experiential learning and field experiences were most frequently cited. However, the study was based on cohorts of students rather than following one group longitudinally. The authors noted that the experiences of first year students may not necessarily apply later in their program. While the two previous studies (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Nelson & Jackson, 2004) limited their research to master's students and one counseling program, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) conducted an extensive study of 100 participants that included not only master's students, but professionals with 20-30 years of experience. From this study, Skovholt and Ronnestad extracted twenty themes regarding counselor development. These themes describe the process of individuation that occurs in counselor development. Some of the themes in their research related to professional development of

counseling students include: the long, slow and erratic process of professional development, personal life strongly influencing professional functioning, interpersonal encounters are more influential than impersonal data and the developing counselor is influenced by multiple sources as professional. There were twenty themes, however in their research Skovholt and Ronnestad did not describe the experience of counseling students in great detail. The research reveals that the development of counseling identities begins during counselor training programs (Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2003; Brott & Myers, 1999; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992); however a rich description of the experience that counseling students go through during the transition of student to counselor seems to be lacking.

In the study conducted by Furr and Carroll (2003), the critical incidents that contributed to counselor identity development were: existential issues/value conflicts, cognitive development, beliefs about competency, professional development, perceived support, perceived obstacles, personal growth (in the program), personal growth (outside the program) and skill development. The study found that both positive and negative incidents influenced development (Furr & Carroll, 2003). Incidents characterized as positive incidents required students to process information that led to increased understanding of self and increased self concept regarding skill development. Incidents characterized as negative incidents required student's to look at personal deficits which in turn increased self awareness. This finding is in keeping with earlier literature. Cormier (1998) states that "mistakes seem to account for a very significant learning experience for the developing...counselor-in-training (p. 131).

Experiential learning is a common theme found in studies regarding counselor identity development. Commonly, reported critical incidents are those associated with field or experiential learning (Furr and Carroll, 2003). Students repeatedly mentioned the importance of gaining experience in being both the counselor and client during basic skills courses. Such courses had greater emotional impact for students. Experiential learning such as role plays, group work, practicum and internship contributed to identity development because students can actively apply what has been learned. In their study on counselor development, Nelson and Jackson (2003) found that students who participated in experiential learning experiences throughout their counselor education program reported an increase in confidence in their skills and ability to apply them. Participants described “a process during which the internship experiences assisted them in changing initial anxiety to excitement about a new identity as a counselor” (p. 8). Events occurring outside of the counseling program were also identified as critical events for developing counselors. Positive growth occurring in students during the course of their program led to positive incidents occurring in interpersonal relationships outside the counseling program relationships.

Knowledge is another common theme in studies done regarding counselor development. In the study conducted by Nelson and Jackson (2003), students spoke of acquiring knowledge, but expressed frustration at not knowing how to apply the knowledge in concrete terms. Students also spoke of changes in his/her theoretical orientation or specialization as a result of knowledge based course work. Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) found that there is a progression through levels of knowledge development as the developing counselor matures. New graduate students function from

what Skovholt and Ronnestad characterize as “received knowledge” (p. 512). Received knowledge can be described as students unquestioningly accepting professional elders’ ideas as accurate and following them without question.

Personal growth is another important theme identified in studies conducted regarding counselor identity development. Activities related to personal growth are personal counseling, diversity experiences, interpersonal relationships, class assignments related to family (Nelson & Jackson, 2003; Furr & Carroll, 2003). Students in the Nelson and Jackson study indicated that personal growth was a factor in the development of a counselor identity. In counseling literature, Cormier (1988) mentions personal growth as a factor in counselor identity; however she also mentions that another important aspect is the meaning of the personal growth experiences to the developing counselor.

The developing counselor can have exposure to the best training methodology, but meaningful learning will not take place without a mentoring relationship between faculty and supervisee; furthermore the quality of the faculty-student relationship is another critical factor or theme in the developing counselor (Cormier, 1988) This thought is in keeping with what Hazler and Kottler (2005) write regarding their experience in supervising students; “One of the most satisfying, exciting, and worthwhile professional relationships that you can ever have is with a faculty member acting as a mentor” (p. 114).

The Nelson and Jackson (2003) study included counseling themes related to cultural issues. Those themes were: relationships, accomplishment, costs and perceptions of the counseling profession. The study indicated that Hispanic students placed great significance on relationships in regard to counselor development. However, this thought

is in agreement with previously discussed research and literature regarding the importance of relationships during this time of development in a counseling student's life (Cormier, 1988; Furr & Carroll 2003; Hazler & Kottler, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Significant relationships included faculty, peers, and family. The theme of accomplishment (Nelson & Jackson, 2003) describes issues regarding achieving the degree, respect, status and a voice. This sense of accomplishment increased self-concept and self worth which in turn contributed to counselor development. Costs included monetary and personal sacrifices. Factors that contributed to cost were financial, lost time with extended family, and juggling family responsibilities. The last additional theme that Nelson and Jackson found in their study of counseling identity themes in Hispanic students was perceptions of counseling profession. This particular theme described participants having to explain to misinformed family and friends the role of a counselor.

Counselor identity development research has produced common themes found among master's level counseling students. Some of these themes include: experiential learning, knowledge and personal growth (Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2003; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Nelson & Jackson, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Experiential learning describes internship experiences and practicum. Knowledge describes classroom experiences, as well as the frustrations expressed by students not knowing how to practically apply new knowledge. Finally, personal growth describes experiences that students have related to personal counseling, diversity experiences, as well as relationships with peers and family.

#### *Identity Formation Model*

In order to understand how students develop counseling identities researchers have attempted to study how students progress through the individuation process to develop counseling identities with the hope of developing models of counselor development (Auxier, Hughes and Kline, 2003). In counseling literature, Holloway (1988) states that a counselor development model should describe, “changes in the emerging counselor as they are actuated in the trainee”. Auxier, Hughes and Kline (2003) contend that deeper understanding of the development of counseling education students can help counseling educators provide experiences that aid in identity development.

In a grounded theory, qualitative study that sought to develop a “provisional theory” of counselor identity development, Auxier, Hughes and Kline (2003) interviewed eight, master’s level students who were completing their internships in counselor education programs in northwestern universities. Two rounds of interviews were conducted, in addition to a focus group that was used to generate data for analysis and ensure that the emerging theory was grounded in the participants’ experiences. From their research emerged the *recycling identity formation process*. In this process there are three components: conceptual learning, experiential learning and external evaluation.

Conceptual learning includes experiences like lectures, reading and submitting papers (Auxier, Hughes and Kline, 2003). Initially, students in the beginning of a counseling education program find these experiences useful, however as the students developed as counselors it was found that the value students put on this type of learning diminished.

Experiential learning became more important to students. Experiential learning experiences include counseling technique classes, practicum, internships, small group



experiences and role plays. However, the transition from conceptual to experiential learning led to the development of anxious feelings. The anxiousness developed as students had emotional reactions to learning which required them to “develop new emotional and behavioral awareness, change interpersonal behaviors, and develop skills based on feedback about their counseling behaviors” (Auxier, Hughes and Kline, 2003, p. 32). This anxiety can be compared with the findings of Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992). The findings of that study indicate that as the counselor develops that there is a decrease in the persistent anxiety that Auxier, Hughes and Kline (2003) describe.

Finally, the last component to this model is external evaluation (Auxier, Hughes and Kline, 2003). This is feedback from peers, supervisors, professors and clients regarding their counseling behaviors and skills. Students experience this feedback as evaluative and consequently experience an ongoing anxiety. External evaluation consistently challenged students’ self concept depending upon how students perceived the evaluation.

Conceptual and experiential learning is a cyclical process (Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2003). These two types of learning influence the other. This cyclical process helped students to form a clearer counseling identity because as “they identified, clarified, and re-clarified definitions of themselves as counselors, the participants’ attitudes toward the learning process usually changed from apprehension to realistic self-confidence” (p. 36). Both conceptual and experiential learning continue to inform the other as the student progresses through the program.

The cyclical nature of the recycling identity process attempts to explain how the individuation process that Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) identify as key to counselor

development occurs (Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2005; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). As confidence in counselor identity is gained through the cyclical process of experiential and conceptual learning, the counselor in training becomes more open to all that the learning experience has to offer and becomes more open to hearing and making changes within themselves and their environment. In their literature review Auxier, Hughes and Kline (2003) mention that the Skovholt and Ronnestad study does not explain how the process of individuation occurs for students, just that it occurs. While the study by Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2005 attempts to explain how the individuation process occurs it still does not speak to the thoughts and feelings of students about the transition that takes place from a student to a professional.

### *The Transition*

Life is a series of transitions. For master's-level, counseling students beginning graduate school is a transition. For some students the transition is from an undergraduate program to a graduate program; and for others the transition is from the workforce to being a student again. As stated by Hazler and Kottler (2005), the purpose of a master's-level, counseling education program is to prepare students to be employed professional counselors. To become a counselor at the end of this training period is yet another transition.

Individuals assume many roles during the course of a lifetime (Rodgers & White, 1993). In marriage and family literature, Rodgers and White (1993) discuss transition theory as a means to describe the transition that occurs when a family moves from one distinct stage to another with each stage representing periods of time. Transitions are a

combination of life stage, event and time. These stages can be navigated by families, relationships or individuals.

In counselor identity literature, Hazler and Kottler (2005) characterize the transition to professional counselor as a time when numerous changes are taking place. Changes include: being a leader instead of a follower, showing initiative and autonomy rather than looking for approval, cooperating rather than competing and being an expert rather than a novice.

The transition not only involves the obvious physical changes (location and financial status), but also a change in self-identity. Hazler and Kottler (2005) liken leaving graduate school to grieving a loss. They state, “When school abruptly stops, it is much like the end of therapy. You know you have grown and that it is time to move on, but you miss the relationships...” (p. 170-171). Hazler and Kottler (2005) also state that the transition from student to professional is characterized by anxiety regarding a new future without school. In the study on counselor identity development, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) found that this anxiety decreases as the student develops into a professional.

One aspect that continually appears in counseling literature that seems to aid students in making the transition to professional is the mentoring relationship (Cormier, 1988; Hazler & Kottler, 2005; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Few other factors are credited as much, in the existing literature, with impacting counselor identity development.

In an article on counselor development, Cormier (1988) states that mentoring relationships are essential in developing effective counselors, as well as aiding students

as they transition to non-student. According to Hazler and Kottler (2005), the purpose of graduate school is to not only teach and provide students with the skills, knowledge, expertise and experience to become an employed professional, but to also make the transition from student to a practicing counselor (2005). Hazler and Kottler (2005) note that graduate programs in mental health counseling are designed to provide mentors like faculty and practicum supervisors, so it is important for students to actively seek out new mentors when they leave school. However, many new professionals experience some isolation after making the transition to professional counselor (Hazler & Kottler, 2005; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). In their study on themes in counselor development, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) found that “external support is most important at the beginning of one’s career and at transition points” (p. 515). They found that this external support is sought from professors, advisers, peers, site supervisors during their training programs. However, at the beginning of the transition from student to professional counselor this external support is still desired. Other than the mentoring relationship, research regarding counseling identity development has not detailed many other factors that contribute to aiding in this transition from student to professional counselor.

In marriage and family literature, Rodgers and White (2005) mention some factors that aid families and individuals during transitions. One of those factors includes “anticipatory socializations” (p. 127). Anticipatory socializations are prior experiences that aid in preparing the individual for a new role, thus easing the transition through past experience or knowledge. This finding is in accordance with counseling literature by Hazler and Kottler in which they found in their experiences supervising students that those students who work on developing independence, assertiveness and professionalism

during school have an easier time transitioning to a professional. By anticipating these factors, it eased the transition for students.

Rodgers and White (2005) note that when individuals look at the transition as “goal attainment,” the transition tends to occur with more ease. Essentially, the transition makes the goal or dream possible. If students’ visions of the future are filled with positive feelings regarding the completion of graduate school and becoming a counselor, then the ease into the transition may be smoother. It is possible that how students experience the transition to the professional world influences the meaning they attach to this event.

Counselor identity development research has produced common themes found among master’s level counseling students. Some of these themes include: experiential learning, knowledge and personal growth (Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2003; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Nelson & Jackson, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) contend that counseling students go through an individuation process. The individuation process is “an increasingly higher order integration of the professional self and the personal self” (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, p. 510). In order to understand how students develop counseling identities researchers have attempted to study how students progress through the individuation process to develop counseling identities (Auxier, Hughes and Kline, 2003). Auxier, Hughes and Kline’s (2003) research study produced the recycling identity process, a provisional theory of counselor identity development. The cyclical nature of the recycling identity process attempts to explain how the individuation process that Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) identify as key to counselor development occurs (Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2005; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

Counselor development research describes themes and proposes counselor identity models of development; however there is little research that speaks to the meaning of the counseling student's experience of becoming a counselor. What does it mean to become a counselor? What are their thoughts and feelings connected to this particular moment in time for counseling students? While there is counseling literature based upon theory and observation which describes the experience of master's level counseling students, there is not an abundance of research describing their thoughts and feelings during the transition from student to professional counselor. In order for counselor educators to continue to train and inspire students, more research is needed that speaks to the students' experiences, experiences that speak of the crucial transition from student to professional counselor. This research is important so that students and counselors educators will know what to expect during this time of transition, as well as what types of practices or experiences could potentially aid students in this time of transition. This study will attempt to explore what the experience of the student is as he/she transitions to a professional counselor, and what meaning is attached to this period of time in a counseling student's life.

### Chapter III: Methodology

A qualitative approach will be used to understand what the experience is for master's-level mental health counseling students as they transition from student to professional counselor. Qualitative research emphasizes that "the meaning of a social action or statement depends, in an important way, on the context in which it appears" (Neuman, 1997, p. 331) Qualitative research includes valuable descriptions and extensive details. According to Neuman, qualitative research gives the reader "a feel for particular people and events in concrete social settings" (p. 328).

It is the rich description and details that this study seeks to understand with mental health counseling students in their last semester. To understand their experiences as they transition from student to counselor, a phenomenological methodology will be used.

Phenomenology instructs researchers, "to allow the phenomenon to reveal itself in its fullness. You look at it from all perspectives using all your senses, even attending to your thoughts and feelings." (Boeree, 1998, p. 3). Phenomenology is "what we believe about the world and the people in it" (Dahl & Boss, 2005, p. 63). A phenomenon can be defined as a methodology, "describing its essential impact on our immediate conscious experience" (Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005, p. 63). For this research study, the phenomenon being studied is the experience of mental health counseling master's students during the last semester of internship. This study is designed to explore the meaning the transition into professional life has for students. By trying to capture the meaning of the experience, the researcher hopes to gain a better understanding of this particular moment in the life of a counseling student.

The primary interest to a phenomenological researcher is meaning, and that meaning can be found within a person's private experience (Dahl & Boss, 2005). Phenomenological research is interested in stories and a phenomenological researcher needs to be prepared to listen to stories (Dahl & Boss, 2005; Boeree, 1989). Previous research by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) has produced extensive research regarding themes throughout the lifetime of a counselor from counseling student to established professional in the field. While this research is very valuable regarding how students and professionals develop counseling identities, the study does not address the experience or the meaning for counseling students who are transitioning into the profession. In a study on themes in counselor identity development for Hispanic counseling interns, Nelson and Jackson (2003) described themes that contributed to students' identity development as counselors. However, this study did not speak to the meaning that the students' attributed to the experience of becoming a counselor. Furr and Carroll (2003) conducted research in which students at various stages in the counseling program were asked to identify critical incidents that influenced their development as counselors, but the meaning attached to these critical incidents was not explored.

This study seeks to explore the experiences of master's-level, mental health counseling students as they transition to professional counselors. What are their thoughts and feelings during the transition? This study is designed to explore the meaning that this transition has professionally and personally for students.

### *Sample*

Because the purpose of phenomenological research is to gain accurate understanding of another's experience (Dahl & Boss, 2005), it is a good fit for research



that can not be generalized to a whole population of people (Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005). The purpose of this study is not to generalize to a whole population of people (Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005, p. 71), but to gain understanding of mental health counseling students in their final semester of internship.

For this qualitative study purposeful sampling will be used to identify three participants. Because the purpose of phenomenological research is to gain accurate understanding of another's experience, a small participant size is appropriate (Dahl & Boss, 2005). Purposeful sampling is a non-probability selection method in which participants are deliberately chosen in an attempt to provide the study with the information that is needed in order to answer the research question (Maxwell 1996). To adequately answer the research question, purposeful sampling will enable this researcher to accurately and deliberately get at the essence of the participants' experience. Participants will be chosen based on their ability articulate his or her experiences as mental health counseling students in the final semester of internship.

Purposeful sampling allows this researcher to choose participants who may best be able to speak to the experiences of mental health counseling students in their final semester of internship. The researcher's advisor will help establish a list of potential participants. However, once a pool of participants are identified the advisor will not know who the researcher contacts, or who agrees to participate. Once potential participants are identified, they will be contacted via an email invitation. At this time they will be informed that participation is completely voluntary and they will not be the subject of ill will or be penalized in any way should he/she decide not to participate.

The criteria for participants are the following: 1.) Participants must be currently enrolled in the University of Wisconsin-Stout, Mental Health Counseling program 2.) Participants must be in their final semester of internship and 3) Participants must be willing to participate in a private one-to-one, face to face interview and a private member check interview.

#### *Validity or trustworthiness*

Validity can be defined as methods that are used to ensure that an “indicator actually captures the meaning of the construct” in which one is interested (Neuman, 1997, p. 138). According to Maxwell (1996), validity does not “imply the existence of any objective truth” (p. 87), rather validity gives researchers some “grounds for distinguishing accounts that are credible from those that are not” (p. 87).

Validity is a term that is usually associated with quantitative research in which researchers employ controls in the design of their research that will deal with anticipated and unanticipated threats to validity (Maxwell, 1996). However, qualitative researchers seldom have the advantage of formal comparisons, sampling strategies or statistical manipulations that control for validity threats. Because validity has been a research term traditionally attached to the quantitative research tradition, some qualitative researchers question whether validity should be applied to qualitative research (Johnson, 1997).

However, most qualitative researchers do contend that some studies are better than others and indicate that qualitative studies that attend to issues of validity threats make for better research (Johnson, 1997). When qualitative researchers attend to validity words like trustworthiness and credibility are used, rather than validity (Flick, 1998; Johnson, 1997).

Essentially, researchers ask themselves can trustworthiness be found in the reported observations, interpretations and generalizations in the qualitative study (Flick, 1998). In qualitative research, validity is defined as “the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusions, explanation, interpretation...” (Maxwell, 1996). For the purpose of this study, validity can be understood in terms of trustworthiness and credibility.

Trustworthiness can be defined as steps that are taken to persuade others that the findings of a study are worth paying attention to and that the findings are indeed true research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Credibility can be defined as methods taken to ensure that the findings in the study are accurately portrayed and accurately reflect the participants’ experiences. Methods that can establish trustworthiness include researcher reflexivity; while methods to establish credibility include participant feedback and peer debriefing (Johnson, 1997, Flick, 1998).

According to Johnson one key threat to the trustworthiness of a qualitative study is researcher bias (1997). Bias is the outcome of selective observation and recording of data, in addition to the researcher’s personal perspective affecting the interpretation of data (Johnson, 1997). To address the issue of bias in this study, researcher reflexivity will be used. Researcher reflexivity is when the researcher earnestly seeks to become more self aware with the intent of understand personal biases and predispositions (Johnson, 1997). The purpose of monitoring these biases is so that the researcher is aware of them and will be able to keep them under control, so the biases do not unduly influence the research (Johnson, 1997). This researcher will become more self-aware by keeping a journal in which biases and predispositions regarding the phenomenon being studied will

be noted. By noting these biases it is the hope of this researcher that these biases will not influence data collection or analysis.

To obtain credibility in this study one method used will be participant feedback. Phenomenological research requires understanding the experience of the participants, and the goal is not to interpret participants' experiences, but rather to understand them. So, the accuracy of data collection becomes very important. The focus of data collection will be to accurately record the participants, and subsequently to have accurate transcriptions to use for data analysis. To promote accurate reflection and to keep researcher bias from affecting the outcome of the data, participants will be asked to give feedback on the researcher's interpretations and comment on those findings. This feedback will aid in clarifying miscommunications and accurately getting at the participants' experiences as mental health counseling students transitioning into the professional world, thus ensuring that the results will be trustworthy and credible. Participant feedback ensures that the results are an accurate portrayal of the participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, peer debriefing will also be used to establish credibility in this study. Peer debriefing involves the researcher having regular meetings with other people who are not involved with research for the purpose of discussing results with them with the purpose of revealing "blind spots" in the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For the purpose of this study, the researcher will regularly be meeting with her research advisor to discuss results.

### *Data collection*

Once participants who fit the criteria are identified for the study they will be invited to participate either personally by the researcher or through an invitation in internship class. Each participant will be given an informed consent statement to sign and confidentiality procedures will be explained to them. Once the three participants are identified, each will be contacted via phone or in person to set up a semi-structured interview. Interviews will take place in a private location that is convenient for the participants and will be done during a time that is convenient for participants. Interviews will be tape recorded and before the interviews begin participants will be asked to read and sign the participant agreement.

Semi-structured interviews ask predetermined, open-ended question, but allow for additional questions to clarify statements (Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005). Data collection methods in phenomenological research need to “allow participants to define phenomena for themselves” (p. 72) which speaks to the desire of this research to not lead the interviews too much with the questions, but rather ask participants to describe their thoughts and feelings about being in the last semester of internship. As described earlier, phenomenon can be defined as something “describing its essential impact on our immediate conscious experience” (Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005, p. 63). For this research study, the phenomena being studied are the experiences of master’s-level students during their final semester as they transition from student to professional. This study is not interested in process, but is interested in the meaning that this transition has for students. To study this phenomenon the data collection method used will be a one-time, semi-structured interview.

Before the interviews each participant will be given a set of the questions, so that each participant will have sufficient time to think about their responses to the questions. Because the purpose of this interview is to look at the meaning that students attach to the transition to professional counselor, it is important to give participants sufficient time to think about their thoughts and feelings regarding this experience. It is hoped that by doing this that it will enhance the answers given during the interview. The following questions will be used during the semi-structured interview:

1. Now that you are in your last semester of school, what are your thoughts and feelings?
2. What does it mean to you as you begin the transition from a student to a counselor?
3. What experiences have contributed to your sense of identity as a counselor?

In addition to the semi-structured interview, the researcher will keep a journal throughout data collection, noting affect responses to the interviews, thoughts about connections and emerging themes between the participants and any observations from reading, class or the researcher's own experiences as a student transitioning that may be related to the study.

#### *Data Analysis*

When doing phenomenological research the goal in data analysis is not to "tie up all the loose ends," but to discern and portray the participants' experiences (Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005, p. 74). Data collection and analysis work together because each informs the other in a process that includes questioning, reflecting and interpreting. This process is looking for meanings in the participants' stories that connect the participants, but also

differentiate the stories. While researchers in phenomenological research “attempt not to impose realities on those of the participants, they definitely impose structure on them” (p. 74). The only rule of analysis is that the researcher must remain connected with the participants and participants’ stories.

One way in which the researcher will remain connected to the participants and their experiences is through ensuring that the interviews were accurately depicted in the transcripts. The researcher will listen to the interview tapes with a hard copy of the transcription to make sure that the essence of the interview experience has been captured. The researcher will listen for pauses and word(s) that the transcriptionist might not have been able to hear or record correctly. By doing this the researcher ensures that the transcripts accurately reflect participants’ thoughts. Doing so also allows the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the participants’ stories, and maintains a connection with the participants and their stories even through the process of transcribing. By remaining connected with the stories, the credibility of the study increases because participants’ meanings are not lost in the transcription process.

Data analysis will involve looking for themes in the transcripts of the interview sessions. Analysis includes looking for themes in the participants’ stories that connect their experience, but also differentiate their experiences as last semester mental health counseling students transitioning to professional counselors. Direct, anonymous quotes will be used in the data analysis whenever possible also ensuring that the meaning of the participants’ experience is not lost. In addition to collecting themes, the researcher will be checking in with participants once more after the data has been analyzed in an attempt to

ensure that their experiences were adequately captured. These member check interviews will be done on an individual basis to ensure each participant's anonymity.

### *Ethical Concerns*

Participants will be informed of the purpose of this study and how data will be collected and will be used. Each participant will be informed that I will be hiring a transcriptionist to type up the interviews and that great measures will be taken to protect their identity. The transcriptionist will not be someone who is connected with the university in order to protect the identity of the participants. Participants will be informed that all identifying information on transcribed copies will be removed. In addition, they will also be informed that transcribed copies and recordings will be kept by the researcher for at least seven years and after that will be destroyed. Participants will be made aware that only the researcher will have access to the audio and transcribed copies of the interview. The intentions of this research will be made aware to participants. The intentions of the research are to produce the researcher's master's thesis, and could be used to generate manuscripts for publication and presentations at professional meetings.

Due to the nature of the interview, I am aware that it is a possibility that some psychological distress could arise. Particularly, when talking about transitioning into a future role, anxiety is a possibility. A campus mental health facility brochure will be given to each participant at the time of the interview. The campus mental health facility can provide further assistance if during the course of the interview the participant decides that it might be helpful. It is possible that the participants may benefit from participation in this study. Reflecting and discussing perceptions and experiences as he/she transitions from a student to a counselor may result in increased awareness of the process of



development in becoming a counselor. Other benefits may include gaining further knowledge related to the field of mental health counseling, as well as further knowledge gained in qualitative research procedures. However, it is possible that participants will receive no benefit from participation in this study.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

With all research studies there are going to be strengths and limitations. With qualitative research this is true due to the nature of this type of study. Most qualitative studies have fewer participants and this poses some differences in terms of strengths and limitations.

Strengths of this study include my personal interest in the topic and contributions to the field of mental health counseling. I am curious about the experiences of mental health counseling students' development into professionals. In addition to my interest is my personal knowledge of what it is like to be a mental health counseling student who is transitioning into the professional realm. It is this prior knowledge that will inform my questions and further enhance my interviews as I seek to really understand the experience of my participants. This prior knowledge could also be a limitation because of the potential to obscure my analysis of the participants' stories. To "bracket" my own assumptions I will be keeping a journal during this experience to actively uncover what my own personal biases might be in regard to this topic. Another strength of this study is the contribution to the field of Mental Health Counseling, in so far as giving understanding to counseling students' professional development during their last semester of internship.

However with every study there are limitations and one limitation is in the area of experience. My lack of experience as an interviewer and as a researcher could be considered to be limitations. It is this lack of experience that might not enable me to adequately capture the experience of the students. Another potential limitation is that the participants and the researcher are currently enrolled in the same graduate program and have developed relationships in and out of class. Our relationships may also contribute to the data collections, because the participants may feel more comfortable talking to me about their experiences. This new dimension to the relationship will be discussed prior to conducting interviews and each of our roles will be clarified with the intent to encourage an openness to exist between the researcher and participants. Another potential limitation is confidentiality. While great care will be taken to protect the identity of the students who participate, there may be some hesitation to share their experiences for fear that he/she might be recognized by faculty members or the research advisor. To ensure that this confidentiality is in place there will be no identifying information on the transcripts, tapes will be secured and destroyed and final products will not contain any identifying information (including gender). Finally, as with all qualitative research, while some general themes regarding the experience of last semester, mental health counseling students can be drawn, these themes will only reflect the experiences of these participants at this particular Mid-west graduate program.

### *Implications*

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore what the experience is for mental health counseling master's students as they transition to professional counselors. What are their thoughts and feelings during the transition? In order for counselor educators to continue to train

and inspire students, more research is needed that speaks to the students' experiences, experiences that speak of the crucial transition from student to professional counselor. It is important so that students and counselors educators will know what to expect during this transition, as well as what types of practices or experiences can aid the student in this time of transition. It is my hope that this study will inspire more research regarding the experience of mental health counseling students as they transition from students to counselors. By doing more research, hopefully the result will produce data that will aid mental health programs in implementing measures that will help students successfully navigate the transition from student to counselor. In addition extended research regarding a potential theory regarding role transitions and specifically, those of counselors in training to professional counselors is an important aspect of research to explore in the field of counselor education. It is important because as Hazler and Kottler state in counseling literature (2005), the purpose of graduate school is to not only teach and provide students with the skills, knowledge, expertise and experience to become an employed professional, but to also make the transition from student to a practicing counselor.

## Chapter IV: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore what the experience is for mental health counseling master's students as they transition to professional counselors. What are their thoughts and feelings during the transition? To understand this experience a qualitative, phenomenological study was conducted to understand the experience of master's-level, counseling students during the last semester of internship. Specifically, this study was designed to explore the meaning that this transition into professional life has for students. By trying to capture the meaning of the experience, this researcher hoped to gain a better understanding of this particular moment in the life of a master's-level, mental health counseling student. The data collection method used was a semi-structured interview with three participants who were master's level mental health counseling students in the final semester of internship at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. This interview was conducted in February of 2006, and the member-check interviews were conducted in April and May of 2006.

After the interviews with participants were complete the tapes of the interviews were transcribed by the researcher and a hired transcriptionist. The interview tapes were listened to with a hard copy of the transcription by the researcher to make sure that the essence of the interview experience had been captured. Pauses and word(s) that the transcriptionist and I might not have heard or recorded correctly were attended to. By doing this it ensured that the transcripts accurately reflect participants' thoughts. This will allow me to develop a deeper understanding of the participants' stories, and maintain a connection with the participants' stories even through the process of transcribing. By

remaining connected with the stories, the credibility of the study increases because participants' meanings are not lost in the transcription process.

Data analysis involved looking for similar and distinct themes in participants' stories as they describe their experiences as final semester, counseling students. One main theme and three sub-themes emerged in the data. The main theme that emerged was *Professionalism*. *Professionalism* describes students' increasing self-identification with the role of professional counselor, and their simultaneous decreasing self-identification as students. *Professionalism* also describes a transition toward increased professional knowledge, behavior and attitudes. Three sub-themes emerged within the main theme *Professionalism*. Those sub-themes are *Shaping the professional*, *Practicing professionalism* and *Emerging professional*.

#### *Professionalism*

Through the course of data analysis the theme *Professionalism* emerged in the participants' described experiences as last semester, mental health counseling interns. *Professionalism* describes students' increasing identification with the role of professional counselor, and their simultaneous decreasing self-identification as students. *Professionalism* also describes a transition toward increased professional knowledge, behavior and attitudes, as well as an internalization of the role of counselor.

Among the participants' stories it seemed as if each of them considered counseling to be their "calling". The notion of *Professionalism* seemed to have increasingly salient meanings for the students in their final semester of graduate school. In the experiences described by each participant there was an increasing awareness regarding of the concept of *Professionalism*. Participants described feeling like whom

he/she was as the counselor and who he/she was as a person had integrated. Participant #1 stated,

“I think who I am and who the counselor is, is the same person. It’s just that I am me first, then the counselor. I don’t think I put on a different hat. I think I am me. I think there is just a little bit more professionalism in there.”

Participant #2 noted, “I feel more in my skin as a counselor the second semester than the first semester”. Participant #3 stated,

“I think I would identify myself more as a practitioner now or being an intern than a student. Granted I do both, but I feel more of the professional role than the student role right now.”

Participants described a growing understanding of what it meant to be a professional. Participants seemed to identify with being a counselor more at this moment in time, than he/she could identify with being a student. There was an excitement and a passion that participants had as he/she described their experiences as last semester counseling interns; and there seemed to be an internalization of the role of counselor in their life. Within the theme *Professionalism* three sub-themes emerged in the participants’ stories: *Shaping the professional*, *Practicing professionalism* and *Emerging professional*.

#### *Shaping the professional.*

In the participants’ stories there was a sub-theme that emerged regarding who and what shaped them into the person that he/she is now. *Shaping the professional* emerged as a sub-theme as participants described whom or what helped them reach this

transitional point in their professional journey. These reflections tended to be more of a reflection on the past, but also included current experiences, particularly at internship sites. *Shaping the professional* is a description of whom or what experiences helped the participants arrive at this moment in time. Participants described professors, fellow students, site supervisors and clients as the individuals who helped “shape” them. Personal reading, classroom experiences and seeking personal counseling were things that participants described as what “shaped” them.

Participants spoke of interactions with graduate professors and fellow classmates as factors that helped shape professional identities. Noted factors include receiving feedback regarding professional development from professors and classmates, as well as hearing the viewpoints and experiences of professors and classmates. Participant #1 stated, “Listening and hearing from my professors. Hearing about the battles they have gone through and what to do and what never to do, all those things. The stories have been really helpful...” Regarding the impact of experiencing fellow classmates one participant stated,

“I think hearing so many different things about people and how they have come to form opinions, judgments, values, morals, whatever there may be is so interesting. And to hear sides of arguments that you are very firm about, but yet able to see their stance. Learning more about who you are through other people and other people’s experiences when maybe you’re not in touch with it or didn’t want to recognize it or maybe I didn’t even know it existed”

In addition to classroom experiences, Participant #1 described a more personal aspect regarding the relationships that developed while in graduate school. This participant described how encouragement from friends contributed to shaping his/her professional identity, “I don’t know if I would have gotten through this if it weren’t for my support system here...the constant push, the gentle push that you can achieve this, you can do this work, this is good for you.”

Participants also described the impact that clients have had in *shaping* their professional self. Participants indicated that experiences with clients also helped them understand their professional self, as well as understand with greater meaning what the counselor’s role is. Participants noted that being present with clients helped them to understand who they were as counselors and contributed to a worldview that had greater depth. Participant #3 described how seeing clients has shaped his/her personal worldview,

“I think seeing clients for the first time has contributed to the way that I have used anxiety. I have found that I have become much more empathetic to the world in general, giving people the benefit of the doubt more often.”

Also noted was the impact that internship site supervisors have had on shaping professional identities, as well as easing the transition from student into professional counselor. Important things noted were feedback from supervisors, willingness to provide needed information, as well as a willingness to teach and model for interns. Participant #3 stated, “I think the fact that she is such a good supervisor has helped me to become a more confident in my practice. ”



In addition to “who” contributed to *shaping* their professional identities, participants also described “what” helped *shape* them. All three participants described engaging in personal reading as being central to *shaping* their professional identity. Participants described books as being instrumental in discerning what counseling theories fit for them. Personal reading choices supplemented the classroom information and contributed to shaping their identity. Participant #2 stated, “I think what I supplemented in made me a stronger student and I think at some levels, it has made me a stronger counselor.”

In addition to personal reading, participants described class room experiences that contributed to personal growth. Participants described the internal processing that resulted from taking experiential counseling classes. As a result of the experiential learning experiences participants noted that he/she gained a deeper understanding of self, as well as a deeper appreciation for the counseling profession. It is this deeper understanding of self that participants attributed to being able to have a greater depth with clients. Regarding feelings that resulted from taking these types of classes Participant #1 states, “...really getting in touch with that has helped me to go deeper with my clients then I have ever gone, deeper than the surface, deeper than something that’s really comfortable to talk about.”

Besides personal reading and classroom experiences, one participant described that seeking personal counseling had also been an important aspect in counselor identity and increasing confidence.

*Shaping the professional* is a description of whom or what contributed to *shaping* the counseling intern’s professional identity. Participants indicated that professors, fellow

classmates, clients and site supervisors played roles in *shaping* their professional self. Participants indicated that engaging in personal reading, classroom experiences and personal counseling were experiences that have *shaped* them.

*Practicing professionalism.*

A second sub-theme that emerged from participant interviews was *Practicing professionalism*. This theme can be described as a developing professional attitude that at times translates into tangible behaviors or activities. Participants described a heightened professional awareness regarding behavior and appearance at internship sites, as well an increasing professional awareness regarding the importance of *practicing* self-directed learning and self-care. It seemed that this heightened professional awareness stemmed from a belief that to become a professional required *practice*.

Participants described the importance of acting like a professional at their internship sites. Participant #2 states, "...even though I'm just an intern, I really consider myself a professional. And I carry that through in making sure that my cases are up-to-date, I don't just leave the office." Participant #2 goes on to describe *Practicing professionalism* even in terms of appearance,

"...even as an intern, my dress, I don't wear jeans. I don't dress down for it. I do not take drinks into the counseling session. These aren't things that are required at my internship, but they are standards that I have personally set as a professional"

Regarding a heightened awareness of behavior at the internship site, Participant #3 states, "I have to watch the way that I am conducting myself because I am more visible now. I am cautious as to what I am seen doing and what I am heard saying." One

participant even described how if felt to get liability insurance right away as a student because this participant felt that it was important to feel like a professional even as a student.

In addition to a heightened awareness regarding professional behaviors and appearance at internship sites, participants also described *practicing* self-directed learning as being an important piece of being a professional. As stated earlier, there was recognition among participants that self-directed learning had contributed to shaping them as a professional counselor, so there was an increased awareness that one needs to practice self-directed learning to continue growing as a professional. One participant described how joining the American Counseling Association and subscribing to professional journals has enabled him/her in feeling like a professional even as a student. This participant states, “When I was a graduate student I threw myself into learning the material and being the best that I could and did a lot of outside reading. I continue to do that now...” Participant #3 describes a new excitement in *practicing* self-directed learning and states,

“I am excited that there are so many doors open to me such as book that I have come across or authors that I have sought out. It is much more self-directed; and maybe that is why I am more excited about it.”

In addition to self-directed learning, participants also expressed a heightened professional awareness in terms of *practicing* self-care, and how this may impact their transition to a professional counselor. There seemed to be a realization taking place, particularly in this last semester of internship as to how important *practicing* self-care

will be in the future. Regarding his/her thoughts surrounding this issue Participant #1 stated,

“I am just realizing some of the things that I haven’t been honest with myself about. Continued self-care and things that I have brushed out of my life; or maybe kind of set aside, but yet knowing that I need them for me. I am me first before I am the counselor. I am me and just being able to care for me.”

One participant, whose internship involved working with victims of violence and sexual abuse noted the impact that such work had on him/her,

“So, I am kind of aware of that and noticing now that I really believe that in our profession self-care is really important. And it was much easier my first semester to do that and I find in my second semester that I am tired a lot; and so I noticed that the self-care even though I know it is important, it just harder to do.”

Finally, participants also described *Practicing professionalism* in terms of a developing theory base and the increasing ability to put the theory into practice when working with clients at their internship sites. One participant stated,

“My counseling theory, I really have kind of like narrowed it down. I have started shaping how I see client problems and issues around theory that I am interested in. ...I’m just having a nice solid base to stand on when I am in session with a client.”

*Practicing professionalism* can be described as a developing professional attitude that at times translates into tangible behaviors or activities. Participants described a

heightened professional awareness regarding behavior and appearance at internship sites. Participants described being more aware of how he/she dresses and how he/she acts at internship sites. Participants also described an increasing professional awareness regarding the importance of self-directed learning and self-care; and finally, participants described being able to practice using their theory base to frame clients' problems and issues.

*Emerging professional.*

A third sub-theme which emerged from participant interviews was the *Emerging professional*. This theme describes the thoughts and feelings that students expressed regarding the final transition from student into their first professional job as a counselor. The thoughts in this theme tended to be future orientated and focused on the details of becoming a professional counselor.

Among the participants contradicting feelings were described regarding this final transition. For example, participants described feeling excitement about finally being able to do what they went to school for; and a sense of anxiety regarding the details of what it required of them to be licensed and find employment. Paradoxical feelings seemed to pervade the minds and hearts of these three last semester counselors in training.

Participant #1 states,

“...so there are so many fears, concerns, and worries, yet so much excitement and joy and pride that kind of work for each other. It's a nice balance. I don't feel overwhelmed by either one... I do still have some feelings of, maybe, competence you know wondering if 'can I do this?', 'I think I can.' I'm building that confidence that is really something I am

going to have to work on for a long time. Knowing that what I have been trained to do in, what progress people have seen in me is really true and I am capable, but yet I still have to work at it.”

Participant #2 also described paradoxical feelings of the Emerging professional as well,

“I’m kind of joyful. You know, I wanted this career change, I’m near the end of it, and my anxiety is about finding a job. What I need to do to get the legal status of paperwork completed so that I can start towards my LPC license.”

All three participants described feeling anxious regarding the legalities of becoming a professional counselor, as well as finding employment that will enable them to accrue hours toward licensure. However, there was a sense of joy and excitement that also surrounded this time of transition.

A sense of loss seems to characterize the *Emerging professional* because in addition to excitement and anxiety, one participant also described a sense of loss and frustration regarding the type of employment that he/she would be able to obtain after graduation: “...it is more or less a two year thing to get my license and then I can see myself quitting to find the job that I really want, but I can’t get the job that I want right away because I am not licensed.” There seemed to be a sense of loss regarding the type of counseling position that this participant had hoped to obtain upon graduation. Another participant described a sense of loss felt regarding a support system and stated, “...I think I am scared because I don’t really...I don’t have a lot of support out of school. ...wondering who will fill their spot and who won’t and if I will?”

The *Emerging professional* is a description of the feelings of participants as their thoughts became future orientated regarding first job and licensure issues. These feelings were paradoxical in the sense that participants felt excitement and anxiety surrounding this time. In addition to excitement and anxiety, participants experienced other feelings like frustration and fear related to loss. Losses for the *Emerging professional* can be characterized as loss of a dream surrounding the type of counseling position that will be available upon graduation, as well as loss of an established support system.

There seems to be a continuum that exists within the theme and sub-themes, each participant seemed to be at a different place on that continuum. All three participants spoke a lot about whom or what experiences have helped *shape* them into a professional, as well as ways in which he/she is *Practicing professionalism* currently or in the past. However, the *Emerging professional* is probably the theme which each participant spoke of the least. With that said, it was definitely present in regard to the next step in the journey. As Participant #1 states regarding becoming a professional counselor, “I think this is my next step.”

## Chapter V: Discussion

What does the transition from student to professional counselor mean for mental health counseling students? What are their thoughts and feelings connected to this particular moment in time for counseling students? What does it mean to students to become a counselor? Finally, what if any experiences have aided them as they begin the transition from student to professional counselor? To answer these questions a phenomenological study was conducted to explore what the experience of the last semester, mental health counseling student is as he/she begins the transition to a professional counselor. In addition to exploring the experience, this study was looking for the meaning that is attached to this period of time in a counseling student's life. Three mental health counseling interns were interviewed using a semi-open interviewing format.

From participant interviews one central theme emerged, *Professionalism*. The notion of *Professionalism* seemed to have increasingly salient meanings for mental health counseling students in the final semester of graduate school. The theme *Professionalism* describes students' increasing identification with the role of professional counselor and their simultaneous decreasing self identification as students. Students seemed to identify with being professionals more at this moment in their journey than students. Within the theme *Professionalism* three sub-themes emerged: *Shaping the professional*, *Practicing professionalism* and *Emerging professional*.

*Shaping the professional* is a description of whom or what helped the participants reach this transitional point in their professional journey. Participants mentioned professors, fellow classmates, clients and site supervisors as individuals who contributed



to *shaping* their professional identity. In addition, participants also described personal reading, classroom experiences and individual counseling as factors that contributed to shaping their identity.

*Practicing professionalism* is a description of a developing professional attitude that at times translates into tangible behaviors or activities. Participants described a heightened professional awareness regarding behavior and appearance at internship sites, as well as an increasing professional awareness regarding practicing self-care and practicing self-directed learning. Participants also described being able to *practice* using their theory base to frame clients' problems and issues.

The *Emerging professional* is a description of the thoughts and feelings expressed by participants regarding the final transition from student into the first professional counseling position. Participants describe feeling excited, yet anxious about the details of licensure and finding a position in which they can accrue hours for licensure. Participants also described feeling a sense of loss as a new chapter in their journey was *emerging*. This loss is connected to frustration at having to take a first job that he/she really did not want, and having to put the type of counseling that he/she really wants to do on hold. Loss was also described at losing an established support system that resulted from graduate school relationships.

### *Limitations*

With every study there are limitations and one limitation of this study was my lack of experience as an interviewer and a researcher. It is this lack of experience that might have hindered being able to adequately capture the experience of the students. Another potential limitation was that the participants and researcher are currently

enrolled in the same graduate program and have developed relationships in and out of class. This new dimension to the relationship was discussed prior to conducting interviews and each of our roles was clarified. Initially, it was felt by this researcher that this could be a potential strength and in many ways it was because the participants were comfortable sharing their experiences. However, during the course of research a question emerged regarding if the participants were too familiar with me. At times during the course of some of the interviews it was necessary to bring the discussion back to the participant's individual experience when I became the sounding board for the program, rather than a discussion regarding his/her experience. Another potential limitation speaks to confidentiality. While great care was taken to protect the identity of the students who participated, there may have been some hesitation to share their experiences in complete openness for fear that he/she might be recognized by faculty members or by my research advisor. To ensure that confidentiality was not compromised, there was no identifying information on the transcripts, tapes were secured and destroyed and final products do not contain any identifying information (including gender). Finally, as with all qualitative research, while some general themes regarding the experience of last semester, mental health counseling students can be drawn, these themes will only reflect the experiences of these participants at this particular Mid-west graduate program.

During the course of research another potential limitation emerged. A question arose regarding whether or not the transition that is trying to be captured in this study can adequately be captured with a phenomenological study. Would a grounded theory study have been a better choice? As noted, I was interested in exploring students' thoughts and feelings during this transition and one could argue that a grounded theory methodology

may have been a more appropriate choice because it is designed to explore process.

While there is rich information that could be captured through a grounded theory methodology, this study was specifically designed to capture one moment in time for participants as he/she transitions from student to professional.

A related issue exists regarding timing. During member check interviews, which occurred after the initial interviews, participants stated that their perceptions had changed since their interview. All three participants agreed that the results accurately reflected what they were feeling and thinking at the time of the interview; however the participants also stated that they had changed, had grown, or had adjusted to some of the previously experienced anxiety. Because the nature of a phenomenological study is to deeply describe participants' experiences at one point in time, the methodological approach did not capture such change within the participants. Such an approach may be considered by future researchers interested in describing this change process in more detail. This study served to accurately describe students' experiences and perceptions at the moment that the interview was conducted, but is not a representation of the full change process.

### *Conclusions*

*Professionalism* was the central theme found in this study. During the final semester of internship, participants described feeling more like counselors, than they did students. In addition, all the participants described feeling like the person he/she was as the counselor and the person he/she was as an individual had integrated to some degree. This finding is in keeping with the individuation process characterized by an extensive study of 100 participants conducted by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992). The individuation process is "an increasingly higher order integration of the professional self

and the personal self” (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, p. 510). As one participant in this study stated, “I think who I am and who the counselor is, is the same person. It’s just that I am me first, then the counselor.” Participants described a growing understanding of what it meant to be a professional and an excitement and passion seemed to permeate this moment in time for the participants.

Within the theme of *Professionalism* there were three sub-themes that emerged in this study: *Shaping the professional*, *Practicing professionalism* and *Emerging professional*. These sub-themes seem to explain how the participants developed a sense of *Professionalism*.

*Shaping the professional* speaks to whom or what experiences have contributed to shaping the counselor identity development in participants. Again, in previously mentioned research conducted by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992), they found that the process of individuation was a time saturated with relationships for counseling professionals. These relationships consisted of professional elders, peers, clients, family and friends. Counseling research indicates that relationships have great significance in terms of counselor identity development (Cormier, 1988; Furr and Carroll, 2003; Skovholt and Ronnestad, 1992) These research findings are consistent with the findings of this study, as participants described professors, classmates, clients and site supervisors as being crucial keys to shaping their counseling identities. Participants noted that feedback from professors, peers and site supervisors was an important aspect of this relationship.

In addition to “who” contributed to *shaping* their professional self, participants also spoke of personal reading, classroom experiences and personal counseling as other

factors that contributed to *shaping* their counselor identity. While there is no research that speaks to the role of personal reading in shaping counseling identities, the importance of experiential learning is a common theme found in counseling research (Auxier, Hughes and Kline, 2003; Furr and Carroll, 2003; Nelson and Jackson, 2003). Experiential learning experiences contributed to shaping identity development as students gained a deeper understanding of self, as well as a deeper appreciation for the professional self.

*Practicing professionalism* speaks to a developing professional attitude that at times translates into tangible behaviors or activities. *Practicing professionalism* is a heightened professional awareness regarding the impact of behaviors and appearances at internship sites, as well as the importance of self-directed learning and self-care. While counseling research speaks of the importance of experiential learning and internship experiences, there is limited discussion regarding the aspect of *Practicing professionalism*. In counseling literature, Hazler and Kottler (2005) write about encouraging students in their own program to begin viewing themselves and acting like professionals. One way in which they encouraged their students to do this was by joining professional organizations. While one participant in this study spoke of the importance of membership in professional organizations, other ways in which professional awareness was heightened was mentioned by all of the participants. Other ways in which participants in this study *Practiced Professionalism* included: a heightened awareness regarding appearance at internship sites, the importance of practicing self-care and the importance of practicing self-directed learning. Practicing professionalism goes beyond experiential learning experiences and seems to encompass an attitude, as well as a behavior that the participants in this study described. It seems to be a heightened

awareness that to become a professional requires practice, that to become a professional does not happen overnight.

*Emerging professional* speaks to the thoughts and feelings that students expressed regarding the final transition from student into their first professional job as a counselor. Characterizing this moment in time for last semester mental health counseling students are paradoxical thoughts and feelings. At times students described feeling excited to finally be able to do what they went to school for, but at the same time anxious regarding licensure and finding employment. This finding is in keeping with counseling identity literature in which Hazler and Kottler (2005) characterize the transition from graduate school to a first professional job as a time when numerous changes are taking place. Hazler and Kottler go on to describe leaving graduate school to grieving a loss. This is consistent with the findings of this study in which participants spoke of losing a support network. The relationships that participants characterized as shaping their professional identities are also the ones in which participants are grieving. One aspect that continually appears in counseling literature that seems to aid students in making the transition to professional is the mentoring relationship (Cormier, 1988, Hazler & Kottler, 2005; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). According to Skovholt & Ronnestad (1992) this external support is particularly important at the beginning of one's career; and this finding is consistent with the findings of this study in which students were grieving the loss of established support systems in graduate school. In addition to the loss of a support network, one participant in this study also spoke to the loss and frustration felt about not being able to get the job that he/she really wanted in the counseling field due to licensure restrictions. This loss described by one participant in this study is in keeping with

marriage and family literature that speaks of transitions occurring with more ease when individuals look at the transition as a “goal attainment” (Rodgers & White, 2005). The loss felt by this participant could be attributed to a sense that his/her “goal attainment” was not complete with graduation, that the restrictions of licensure prevented the actual “goal attainment.”

For some individuals, one of those stages is that of student. A transition takes place into the role of graduate student from various other roles like career person, undergraduate student or homemaker. However, at some point in time another transition will take place for the master’s-level counseling student into the role of a professional counselor. Graduate school ends and a new stage begins for the individual, that of professional counselor.

Within the theme of *Professionalism* there were three sub-themes that emerged in this study: *Shaping the professional*, *Practicing professionalism* and *Emerging professional*. *Shaping the professional* describes individuals and experiences that have contributed to shaping the counselor identity development in participants. *Practicing professionalism* speaks to a developing professional attitude that at times translates into tangible behaviors or activities. *Emerging professional* describes the thoughts and feelings that students expressed regarding the final transition from student into their first professional job as a counselor. These themes emerged as participants in this study shared what his/her experiences were in the final semester of internship. Thoughts and feelings that characterized this moment in time were paradoxical, in that there were moments of excitement and pride, as well as moments of anxiety and fear as each

participant reflected upon the experiences during internship, as well as experiences in their training program.

### *Recommendations*

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore what the experience is for mental health counseling master's students as they transition to professional counselor. What are the thoughts and feelings of counseling students during the transition to a professional counselor?

Ideally, this research will inspire discussion regarding the concept of professional transitions among counselor educators and students. The findings of this study support findings of current research regarding the relationships that influence the shaping of counselor identities, as well as the loss experienced when leaving graduate school. In order for counselor educators to continue to train and inspire students, more research is needed that speaks to the students' experiences, experiences that speak of the crucial transition from student to professional counselor. It is important so that students and counselors educators will have greater knowledge regarding this transition, as well as what types of practices or experiences can aid the student in this time of transition.

Further research in other settings is needed regarding the experience of counseling students as they transition from students to counselors. By doing more research, the result may produce data that can aid counseling programs in implementing measures that will help students successfully navigate the transition from student to counselor.

In addition, extended research regarding a potential theory regarding role transitions, specifically of students in training as they transition to professional counselors, is an important aspect of research to explore in the field of counselor education. This aspect of research is important because the purpose of graduate school is



not only to teach and provide students the skills, knowledge, expertise and experience to become an employed professional, but also to help students who are integrating their personal self with the professional self to transition smoothly and successfully to a practicing counselor (Hazler & Kottler, 2005).

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