Exploring Counselors' Personal Guiding Theories: A Qualitative Study in Portraiture

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Abstract

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Keywords

Personal Guiding Theory, Qualitative Research, Portraiture, Counselor Identity Development

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A Qualitative Study in Portraiture

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A personal guiding theory of counseling is an important component of professional identity development for counselors. We utilized the qualitative methodology of portraiture to explore how professional counselors understand their own personal guiding theories of counseling. Three research portraits are shared that demonstrate how participants use the counseling relationship as the means to incorporate their personal guiding theories into their work with clients. Implications for counselors and counselor educators and future research are presented. Keywords: Personal Guiding Theory, Qualitative Research, Portraiture, Counselor Identity Development

Counselor professional identity development includes an array of components, knowledge, and skills (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). A core component is the development of a personal guiding theory of counseling (Rønnestadt & Skovholt, 2013). A personal guiding theory is a counselor's foundational philosophy that guides therapeutic work with clients (Barth, 2016), and consists of personal values and beliefs, worldview, and personality (Jones-Smith, 2016). When combined with other knowledge and skills such as interpersonal skills, assessment, professional ethics, client conceptualization, and treatment planning, a strong professional counselor identity will emerge (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Rønnestadt & Skovholt, 2013).

Although numerous quantitative research studies have been conducted on which theories counselors and other helping professionals are using (Cook, Biyanova, Elhai, Schnurr & Coyne, 2010; Norcross & Rogan, 2013; Orlinsky & Rønnestadt, 2005; Young, 1993), qualitative research is needed that explores the unique ways that counselors define their personal guiding theory of counseling. In fact, a better understanding of the ways in which counselors experience this phenomenon can significantly improve client experience, the processes of clinical supervision, and training in counselor education programs. Furthermore, most research (Cook et al., 2010; Norcross & Rogan, 2013; Orlinsky & Rønnestadt, 2005) in this area has focused on psychotherapists, clinical psychologists, social workers, and other licensed helping professionals, and not for counselors specifically.

Counselors are unique among providers of mental health care services in several ways. The American Counseling Association (ACA), the primary representative organization for the counseling profession reports that counseling is "a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals" (ACA, n.d.). Counselors work primarily from a wellness perspective, with a focus on not only what may be wrong, but also what is right for those in their care. Within the

humanistic tradition, this approach to working with diverse symptoms and needs is different from other psychotherapists, who largely work within a medical model on alleviating symptoms (Glasoff, Schwarz, & DiZenzo-Priestley, 2017). Within the holistic counseling framework, counselors can flexibly work from various theories of counseling as they meet the needs of their clients. This qualitative study focused specifically on exploring how counselors define their personal guiding theory of counseling.

Language and Personal Guiding Theory

Counseling theories provide a roadmap for the counselor to use as a guide when conceptualizing client problems, deciding on effective interventions, and measuring progress (Fall, Holden, & Marquis, 2017; Wampold, 2012). Various terms have been employed in the literature to describe the phenomenon of a personal guiding theory including a *personal model of counseling* (CACREP, 2016) a *theoretical orientation* (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2013), a *theoretical identity* (Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982), and a *personal theory of counseling* (Watts, 1993). The term *personal guiding theory* is used here as a way to describe the complex and ongoing nature of this phenomenon that involves not only the study and understanding of various theoretical approaches, but also an alignment of the counselor's values and beliefs with the philosophical foundation of a particular theoretical approach (Halbur & Halbur, 2019; Jones-Smith, 2016; Watts, 1993).

Development of a Personal Guiding Theory

Both Watts (1993) in his original work and Jones-Smith (2016) in her counseling theories text have proposed models of personal guiding theory development. Their theories are based on their own experiences and observations of counseling students. Both models agree this developmental process begins during graduate training as a counseling student gains an understanding of their own central values and beliefs. They then learn about various models of counseling, leading the counseling student to align, at least initially, with a counseling theory. This initial personal guiding theory is practiced until the counseling student or novice counselor becomes comfortable using this theory. According to Jones-Smith (2016) some counselors end their development at this point and practice from a single theory approach. For Watts (1993), once an initial personal guiding theory has become comfortable, the student or novice counselor begins to integrate techniques from other theories into their counseling practice. Both models agree that as counselors continually refine their guiding theory across their career, their development continues to be influenced by personal beliefs and values, past clinical experiences, educational experiences, and current research on effective treatment. The counselor also becomes better able to articulate their personal guiding theory while remaining open to continual reflection and refinement of their personal guiding theory.

Current Study Framework

Because there is a lack of understanding of how a personal guiding theory emerges as well as how the counselor develops and comes to define their guiding theory, the goal of this qualitative study was to explore how counselors understand their own personal guiding theory of counseling. The following questions were used to guide this study: How do counselors define their personal guiding theory of counseling? How do they incorporate their personal guiding theory into their work with clients? Through a better understanding of the process through which counselors come to develop, define and utilize their personal guiding theory, counselors and educators can better implement intentional experiences to ultimately promote

professional identity development. Additionally, more knowledge regarding this phenomenon can act as a starting-point for additional qualitative and quantitative research.

Researcher Background, Context, and Positionality

All three authors have experience as counselors and are currently counselor educators who train students to become counselors. As counselor educators, all three are interested in the development of students. At the time of this study, I (Amy, the first author) was a doctoral candidate and this study was my dissertation work. The second author was the director of my dissertation committee and guided me through the completion of this study. The third author is a current colleague who assisted in the writing of this manuscript.

My interest in the phenomenon personal guiding theory initially grew out of my experience as a counselor. Prior to entering my doctoral program, I worked as a counselor with youth and families for over ten years. As a counselor, I became interested in what theoretical framework was guiding my work with clients. I began to study several different theories in-depth and using these frameworks to conceptualize clients and guide the decisions I was making in sessions. While in my doctoral program, in addition to studying my own theoretical framework I became interested in what if any developmental process happens for counselors in their identification with a theoretical framework. It was during this time that I began to use the term personal guiding theory which I define as, "a counselor's foundational philosophy of how people grow, change, and develop that guides therapeutic work with clients" (Barth, 2016, p. 1). I believe that each counselor has a personal guiding theory, development of a personal guiding theory is a complex process that involves the integration of the personal and professional, and this developmental process evolves throughout the career-span of each counselor. Thus, my hope for my dissertation, given the fact that little empirical research exists regarding this type of development, was to gain a better understanding of how this development process happens. Additionally, I wanted to gain insight into how counselors define and use their personal guiding theory in work with clients. The in-depth study of this phenomenon has not only assisted me in understanding my own development as a counselor but has also informed my work as a counselor educator. In my role as a counselor educator, I have been able to create learning opportunities for students to assist in their development of a personal guiding theory of counseling.

Method

In order to explore the experiences of counselors and their definitions of a personal guiding theory, the qualitative methodology of *Portraiture* was implemented as based on work of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997). Portraiture is an interdisciplinary methodology that focuses not only on the lived experiences and individual meanings of the participant but also on the creation of what is referred to as a "research portrait," which creatively expresses the research questions and is individual to each participant. As in the counseling profession, portraiture also values the relationship between the researcher and the participant. In portraiture, the dialogue between the researcher and participant is emphasized as an understanding is created together with the goal to create an authentic narrative that illuminates the meaning that the participant ascribes to a phenomenon, event, or situation.

Another characteristic of portraiture is the importance of listening. In counseling, counselors use active listening skills in order to understand each client within their own unique context. In portraiture, the researcher becomes a narrator through listening for a story and is actively engaged in the creation of the narrative (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). The role of the self as researcher is also a key component of this approach. In counseling, counselors utilize

themselves as a tool to create a relationship through which the client can grow. As counselors bring themselves into the counseling relationship, in portraiture the presence of the researcher is acknowledged and the researcher's presence influences the process from start to finish (Chapman, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005).

Participants

Originally, thirteen licensed professional counselors engaged in this study. Participants of the study were predominantly white and female. Three of the participants were male, while the remaining ten were female. Two participants defined their ethnicity as African American and one as Indian, while the rest identified as white. Ages of the participants ranged from 37 to 69. Study participants were employed in a variety of settings, with the majority being in private practice (5 out of 13). Other work settings included high school (2), correctional facility, youth-based service agency, government child-welfare organization, American Indian Tribe, and community mental health organization. Years of counseling experience ranged from 10 years to 34 years.

The first author recruited participants through reputation and purposive sampling. I used the following participant criteria to recruit participants:

1. Counselors who completed a least a master's degree in counseling (may have additional education beyond a master's degree).
2. Counselors who hold counseling licensure to practice in the state in which they are currently practicing.
3. Counselors who have 10 or more years of clinical counseling experience.
4. Counselors practicing within the United States.

Following Institutional Review Board approval, the first author recruited participants through email requests, and in-person recruitment at professional conferences. Additionally, I utilized my own networks and asked professional counselors I knew if they would be willing to participate. Once a participant was identified, I contacted them by either phone or email. Our recruitment procedures included a description of the study, the participant criteria, and their role as a participant. Once a participant agreed to participate I provided the Informed Consent by email. Participants brought a signed copy to the first interview. I did not provide any monetary compensation to participants.

Data Collection

The first author collected data utilizing the portraiture method, which emphasizes the need for three unique forms of data. Triangulation of data allows the researcher to layer the data, assisting in setting the context, finding points of convergence, and emergent themes (Davis, 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I selected the following three types of data for collection: in-depth interviews, photographs, and archival documents were selected.

The first author engaged thirteen participants in a two-part interview process. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to one hour and a half in length. All interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and then transcribed into a Word document. During the first interview, I focused on the life and professional history of each participant and included questions such as "How did you become a counselor?" and "What values or beliefs guide your work with clients?" and "How would you describe what a counselor does?" In the second interview, I focused on each participant's experience as a counselor and how they defined their personal guiding theory of counseling. In the second interview, I asked questions such as "How

do you define your current identification of a personal guiding theory of counseling?"; "How does the picture you chose represent your personal guiding theory of counseling?" See Appendix A for the full interview guide. To promote capturing the complexity of a counselor's personal guiding theory, photographs were utilized to enhance the interviews. Similar to the style of reflective photography—in which photographs are taken by participants and then followed by a reflective interview (Hurworth, 2003)—participants were asked to either find or take a picture that represented their personal guiding theory during their first interview. During the second interview, participants were then asked to share their chosen photograph and elaborate on how that picture represented their personal guiding theory. The pictures themselves were not analyzed; however, the description of how the picture represented each participant's personal guiding theory was used in the analysis.

The first author asked for and collected copies of the Informed Consent for services that each participant uses. Informed Consent is a document that clients sign consenting to counseling services. Many counselors include a description of their personal guiding theory on this document. Six of the 13 participants provided this documentation. I analyzed these forms for how counselors explain their personal guiding theory.

Data Analysis

In their seminal work on portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe the data analysis process as an "interpretive and analytic process … [that] begins immediately and threads its way through data collection until it becomes the central activity of synthesizing, sorting, and organizing" (p. 214). They recommend that each portraitist develop a "process and structure" for organizing the data, examining patterns, and establishing themes. The first author reviewed the first interview transcript for each participant prior to the second interview. Due to the rapidness of the interviews, the bulk of the coding took place after all the interviews were completed. The first author initially coded all 26 interview transcripts using an open line-by-line method, resulting in 128 different codes. Following this initial cycle of coding, the first author reorganized the codes into 10 overarching patterns based on participants' values, beliefs, behaviors, and practices. To further refine and condense categories, the first author utilized the five modes of analysis —repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, institutional and cultural rituals, triangulation of data, and revealing patterns —as outlined by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis. A profile of each of the 13 participants was created outlining each participant's definition of a personal guiding theory, factors affecting the development of his or her personal guiding theory, and how a personal guiding theory was incorporated into his or her work with clients. These profiles, the patterns, and original data were re-coded to establish themes across participants and within participants.

Trustworthiness

Multiple strategies were used to optimize the trustworthiness in this study including reflexive memos, member checking, triangulation, negative case analysis, and an audit trail. The first author kept reflexive memos in a research journal which assisted in reflecting on and addressing researcher biases and hunches about potential patterns and themes. In the interest of safeguarding authenticity, each participant was provided with the profile, created in order to assure that each participant was honestly and genuinely represented, and asked to provide feedback on this creation for the researcher. Triangulation was achieved by collecting and analyzing several forms of data including interview transcripts, documents, and photographs. Finally, the first author kept an ongoing project log that documented daily research activities.

Findings

One of the themes that emerged from the larger study was the belief that the counseling relationship is the most important part of the counseling process. In fact, the word *relationship* was used 192 throughout the transcripts. The counseling relationship permeated the personal guiding theory definitions of the participants. Additionally, several participants shared about significant relationships that influenced the development of their personal guiding theory. Finally, counselors incorporated their personal guiding theory into their work with clients through the counseling relationship.

In addition to data collection, portraiture is a method for presenting qualitative data by creating a narrative portrayal, or research portrait, (Davis, 2003). Portraitists aim to capture the essence of the participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1986). In the style of portraiture, we created research portraits to provide insight into how counselors use the counseling relationship to incorporate their personal guiding theory into their counseling work. These three participants were chosen for several reasons. First, their descriptions of not only their personal guiding theories but also their counseling work were imbued with the importance of the counseling relationship. Second, Sonia, Renata, and Christopher's, experiences and perceptions each highlighted a different aspect of this theme that emanated from the data collected across all thirteen participants.

Pseudonyms were used for each participant, not only to preserve confidentiality but also to preserve the unique characteristics of each person. For example, one of the participants was named "Renata" which means, "rebirth, born anew" (Renata, 2019). This pseudonym was selected for this participant because of the reoccurring themes of holism and development within her interviews. Likewise, "Sonia" and "Christopher" were selected for the other participants.

Sonia "Capacity for Change"

Figure 1.

Sonia is a seasoned counselor who has experience working in a variety of settings. She currently works as a counselor educator. According to Sonia, her personal guiding theory is based on the belief that each person has within them the ability and resources to change and

the counseling relationship can be the place to ignite these changes. She chose a picture of flowers (see Figure 1) growing up through dead leaves to represent her personal guiding theory. This picture illustrated her belief in the resilience of clients:

> This is a picture of my theory. My thought is that when all seems dreary and dark, life can be renewed with the help of a counselor. Within each person is potential for growth and life when someone believes in him or her and challenges him or her to go beyond what he or she originally thought was possible.

Not only does Sonia believe in each person's ability to change and grow, but she believes that people want to change. She stated, "I firmly believe that people want to change." For Sonia, it is through the counseling relationship where growth and change takes place. She expressed, "there is within that person the ability to do that and maybe not be themselves, but certainly collaboratively we can help each person become better with the resources within themselves." She sees the counseling relationship as collaborative partnership between herself and the client, no matter how young or old the client may be. Sonia demonstrated this belief in how she viewed the collaborative relationship with clients; "I need to connect with them and then figure out what is the best way for them to get from point A to point B without [emphasis added] telling them how to [do] it because that doesn't work."

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Even though Sonia has worked in a number of different settings, including school counseling, family therapy, chemical dependency treatment, community mental health, and private practice, her value of unconditional positive regard permeated throughout the stories she shared regarding her work with clients. She noted, "I also believe firmly that kindness and empathy and that unconditional positive regard is basic that flows through everything." She went on to say, "I can't tell you the number of people who come in and say you won't believe this or nobody believes me when I say this and it's, like, tell me and I'm non-judgmental." Additionally, she expressed: "I know that this is that person's truth, and I will respect that person's truth rather than is it true." For her as a counselor, it is not her place to judge or decide if what each person says is true or not, but to accept the truth of each person's experience.

Renata "Holism"

Renata is a counselor who works in mental health private practice. Renata's personal guiding theory centered on the concept of holism. She viewed each client from a holistic perspective, integrating the physical, behavioral, emotional, cognitive, relational and historical aspects of each client into her assessment, goal planning, and interventions. According to Renata, "I treat the whole person." She described counseling as "a process of becoming." She worked to help each client develop a sense of congruence and personal integration.

Figure 2.

Renata used the image of a chambered nautilus (see Figure 2) to exemplify her holistic perspective. She described:

> The chambered nautilus is a really powerful symbol because it is one of the most successful creatures on the planet … it starts out really, really tiny, almost microscopically small and it builds this little chamber, it lives in … and it carries it with it whenever, wherever it goes … carries all of its chambers with it. When it grows out of its home it moves into a bigger chamber and it has this little wall of pearl that it creates to separate these developmental stages. Then there's this siphuncle that permeates the middle of the shell that it can control with oxygen and gas and fluid to make it move fast or slower, sink or rise in the water … that it just struck this delicate balance of valuing the past while moving forward and in a very intuitive way creating a sense equilibrium where it lives outside its shell, it knows when and how to retreat and it's always moving outward and forward and has been fabulously successful.

For Renata, the chambered nautilus' continual evolution mirrors the counseling process in which a client's past experiences are valued so that the client can gain perspective in order to move forward. According to Renata, "we don't move forward into a new future until we really deal with our past." Clients also gain the ability to create a sense of equilibrium of knowing when and how to protect one's self. She helped clients heal by understanding a process of becoming that values the past, while moving forward. She used this perspective of the chambered nautilus to help clients heal from wounds in their past in order to create goals and move into a new future where they have found their own equilibrium between what they can and cannot control in their lives.

Similar to the other two participants, Renata believed the counseling relationship to be the most critical component of the counseling process. She expressed: "It's the quality of the relationship that is the catalyst that moves people through change." To Renata, the techniques used were not nearly as significant as whether a therapeutic relationship exists. She discussed:

It really is the strength and depth of the relationship that carries all of that process forward. To have the best skills and no relationship there's no therapy and if you have a fabulous [relationship] and no interventions then I would imagine there's still some therapeutic benefit, but you clearly have to have both, in my mind.

For Renata, techniques worked when they were used within the context of an established therapeutic relationship. She believed that along with providing clients with understanding and validation that clients also needed skills to use in their lives. She shared, "they needed some kind of process that they don't understand or they wouldn't be in my office." Similar to other participants, she discussed the importance of meeting the needs and goals of each individual client. This led her to begin to incorporate additional techniques and interventions into her counseling work such as specialized training in sex therapy certification.

Christopher "Relational Exploration"

Christopher is a licensed professional counselor working in private practice. He described his personal guiding theory of counseling as "relational exploration." He provided the following example of how he explains counseling to clients,

I'm here to work through this with you. I certainly don't know the answer to your problem but I'm convinced there's an answer out there … I'm willing and I wanna work towards figuring it out with you.

Figure 3.

Name of practice has been removed to maintain confidentiality.

According to Christopher, it is through the counseling relationship where the counselor and client together explore a client's goals, concerns, and issues. He saw relational exploration as being a collaborative effort between counselor and client. He used the metaphor of going on a journey with clients to illustrate collaboration. He stated: "I really emphasize to people that I'm along this journey with you that I see my role as being alongside you through whatever experience you're going through right now." He provided the logo of his private practice (see Figure 3) to illustrate his personal guiding theory (name of the practice has been obscured to maintain confidentiality). He shared how he describes this to his clients:

> I discuss it as a journey. And say if you're right here (uses his hands to demonstrate being right here) at point A and you're trying to get to point B (uses his hands to show moving from point A to point B) my job is not to be at point B, but to be at point A with you, wherever you are and to … figure it out with you. Not to say, not to be at point B and say this is what you need to do. You need to do this, that and the other thing, but to say no, let's wrestle through this together. Let's figure it out together … I see my role as being right alongside you and walking up that mountain together figuring it out along the way.

Furthermore, he described his desire to develop and maintain authentic relationships with clients. He stated, "I really do see it as an authentic relationship that I value … my hope is to touch their spirit and again on that relational level be someone who is truly authentic, maybe the one authentic person in their life." For Christopher, it was important that he role model authenticity in his counseling relationships.

> Hopefully in modeling for them that that this is an authentic thing, I think that people being authentic in their everyday relationships is what's really gonna help people with a lot of challenges, like emotional, I think that can help with emotional problems and being authentic and just as much as possible as much as we're capable in that moment.

He wanted his clients to understand that he genuinely cares for them and is willing to support them through the counseling process.

Discussion

Professional identity development is a life-long process for counselors, beginning on their first day of graduate school. This process represents the integration of the personal self, including values and worldview, as well as more technical aspects of the counseling profession, such as techniques. The development of a personal guiding theory is also an important aspect of professional development (Rønnestadt & Skovholt, 2013). Previous research (Cook et al., 2010; Norcross & Rogan, 2013; Orlinsky & Rønnestadt, 2005; Young, 1993) on the phenomenon of personal guiding theory has predominantly been quantitative in nature, surveying participants on which theory or theories they use or are influenced by. The current study expands the counseling literature by exploring how counselors come to understand their personal guiding theory.

Definitions of Personal Guiding Theories

As would be expected, each participant expressed a definition of their theory that is unique to their experiences as a person and as a counseling professional. The counseling profession is grounded in the tenets of humanism (Vereen, Hill, Sosa, & Kress, 2014). The participants of this study espoused many of the core principles of humanism in their descriptions of their personal guiding theory. The portraits shared highlight several of these humanistic principles including capacity for growth, holism, and authenticity. For Sonia, each person not only has the capacity to but also desires to change. Rogers (1989) called this capacity for growth, actualizing tendency, which he defined as, every person has the natural inclination "to grow, to develop, and to realize its [sic] full potential" (p. 137). Renata's definition of a personal guiding theory embodies the humanistic principle of holism. For Renata, this holism, not only included focusing on the physical, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional aspects of

each client's present experience but also the client's past experiences and aspirations for the future. Christopher emphasized the importance of authenticity in the counseling relationship. For humanists, authenticity on the part of the counselor is believed to be one of the most valuable conditions needed to create an environment in which change is facilitated (Cain, 2002). Christopher believed that people can change when they are in an authentic relationship with another person.

The Counseling Relationship

Another theme also emerged from the research portraits presented. Participants emphasized the importance of the counseling relationship in their work with clients. Christopher used the term "relational exploration" to describe his personal guiding theory. For Christopher, he saw his role as a counselor to work collaboratively with clients to explore their concerns and goals, and to accompany them on the journey of working towards their goals. Renata discussed the "quality" of the relationship as being a critical component in the process of counseling that assists clients to change. She believed that techniques worked because of the quality of the therapeutic relationship, not because of the specific techniques used. Sonia also described the counseling relationship as the place where change happens. She explained that a counselor helps by having a belief that each person has the capacity to change and then collaboratively working with each client to find what will work for that particular. These statements by the Sonia, Renata, and Christopher on the value and role of the counseling relationship illustrate the relational and collaborative emphasis of their personal guiding theories that was a theme among the counselors who participated in this study.

Implications

Counseling theory provides a foundation upon which counselors build their practice and remains an important component of professional identity development. A personal guiding theory of counseling is a unique construct that begins with a definition that evolves across a counselor's career (Barth, 2016). The current qualitative research presents several definitions of a personal guiding theory as a first step in understanding this developmental process. As such, there are numerous implications for master's students as well as practicing counselors. For the counseling student, this process begins with aligning values and beliefs with a theoretical approach and then being able to articulate a personal definition of a guiding theory. As counselors continue to practice, learn, and reflect, they will continue to refine this personal definition of a guiding theory (Jones-Smith, 2016; Watts, 1993). The portraits highlighted in this article demonstrate the use of various humanistic concepts and a focus on the counseling relationship. Many counselors are drawn to the field of counseling because their values and beliefs align with humanistic principles on which the field is founded (Vereen, Hill, Sosa, & Kress, 2014). Given the day-to-day demands of counseling practice, along with all the administrative tasks, how does a counselor maintain congruence between their personal guiding theory and what they are doing in sessions with clients? Professional growth and development occur when counselors are open to personal reflection and learning about theory and therapeutic interventions, whereas, professional development can become stagnated when counselors do not practice personal reflection and learning (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2013).

The findings of this study can also provide important implications for counselor educators in the training of counseling students. While most counseling masters programs provide training in counseling theory, emphasizing the use of theory across the curriculum can provide opportunities for students to begin to define, in their own words, their personal guiding theory. Additionally, counselor educators can help students understand what a personal guiding

theory is and the value of having a foundation on which to base one's practice on (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2013; Wampold, 2012). Furthermore, the personal guiding theories highlighted in this article demonstrate a strong humanistic influence, counselor educators can assist students in gaining a solid humanistic foundation through understanding the history of the counseling field.

Limitations

Although the findings of this article expand the understanding of how counselors understand and utilize their personal guiding theory of counseling, there are several limitations with this study. To begin with, the findings of this article focus on the experiences of a small number of counselors. Additionally, despite the fact that the participants had engaged in counseling in a wide variety of settings and with different populations, they lacked diversity in other demographic aspects including race and gender. The primary researcher (the first author) was based in the Midwest so participant recruitment was limited to a local network and location. Hence there is a need for future studies to explore the experiences around personal guiding theory for counselors in different locations and with different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Finally, one of the criteria for participants of this study was to have at least 10 years of counseling experience. There is a need for future research to explore how counselors at various developmental phases describe their personal guiding theories. Given these limitations, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all counselors.

Directions for Future Research

Taken into consideration the findings, the limitations, and the exploratory nature of this study, there are several areas that warrant additional investigation. Future qualitative studies can build on the findings of this study using a more diverse participant population to continue to explore how counselors experience, define, and utilize a personal guiding theory. Furthermore, qualitative longitudinal studies can investigate the process of developing a personal guiding theory across the career-span of counselors, exploring patterns and themes at various developmental stages.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how counselors understand their personal guiding theory through the qualitative methodology of portraiture. Three research portraits were created that demonstrate how counselor incorporate their personal guiding theories into their counseling work through the counseling relationship. Given that a personal guiding theory is a foundation upon which counselors can build and use as a guide for their counseling practice, counselor educators can play an important role is assisting students in understanding what a personal guiding theory of counseling is and how this developmental process occurs. As counselors continue to develop throughout their practice, reflection on experiences with clients and learning can help to renew and refine personal guiding theory definitions.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Interview One (life history):

How did you become a counselor?

Describe your training to become a counselor?

       What was a favorite course or experience as a counseling student?

       What did you find most challenging as a counseling student?

Was there anything missing in your training? If yes, what do you believe was missing?

What advice would you give someone who is thinking about becoming a counselor?

       What advice would you give a new counselor?

How would you describe what a counselor does?

       If I was a new client, how would you explain the counseling process to me?

       What do you find satisfying about being a counselor?

       What do you find challenging about being a counselor?

       What is important to you in your work as a counselor? Tell me about something you found to be important in your work?

Where do you get support as a counselor? Who do you consult with/receive supervision from?

What primary beliefs or values guide your life?

       What beliefs or values guide your work with clients? How would you describe your worldview?

       What are your strengths as a counselor? What are some areas that you would like to improve as a counselor?

What relationships in your life have been or are the most significant to you?

Interview Two (clinical experience and reflection of meaning):

Tell me about typical day at the office/agency/school?

Describe a typical session with a client?

Tell me about a memorable client and your counseling relationship with that client?

Tell me about some of the counseling techniques you used most often?

How do you define your current identification of a personal guiding theory of counseling?

What influenced the process of developing a personal guiding theory of counseling?

       What activities influenced the process?

       What factors influenced the process?

       What relationship or people influenced the process?

       What critical incidents or development milestones influenced the process?

How do you incorporate your personal guiding theory of counseling into clinical practice?

How does the picture you chose represent your personal guiding theory of counseling?
Describe how your personal guiding theory of counseling has evolves/changed overtime?
      What changes have you undergone since being a MA counseling student?
      What changes have you undergone since being a novice counselor?
Given what you have told me about how you work with clients, how your personal guiding theory of counseling has evolved, how do you understand counseling in your life? What sense does that make to you?
Given what you have reconstructed in these interviews, how do you see yourself developing as counselor in the future? How do you see your personal guiding theory of counseling evolving in the future?

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