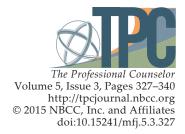# A Phenomenological Investigation of Master's-Level Counselor Research Identity Development Stages

Maribeth F. Jorgensen, Kelly Duncan

This study explored counselor research identity, an aspect of professional identity, in master's-level counseling students. Twelve students participated in individual interviews; six of the participants were involved in a focus group interview and visual representation process. The three data sources supported the emergence of five themes. The authors describe the themes in terms of what students contributed to the following three stages of research identity development: stage one, *stagnation*; stage two, *negotiation*; and stage three, *stabilization*. Implications for counselor education programs, counselor educators and counseling students are explored.

Keywords: **phenomenological investigation, research identity, counseling students, focus group, counselor education**

Counselor professional identity is complex and involves various developmental tasks that are dependent on both interpersonal and intrapersonal interactions (Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003; Reisetter et al., 2004). According to Nugent and Jones (2009), "counselor professional identity is the integration of professional training and personal attributes within the context of the professional community" (p. 21). The context of a professional community may be understood as the behaviors, thoughts, actions and beliefs to which individuals within a professional community typically ascribe. All dimensions of counselor professional identity significantly impact how individuals behave, act and think within the context of their professional role (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010). The understanding of attitude, behavior and belief norms within the profession of counseling has been extremely important in assessing and stimulating the development of professional identity (Gibson et al., 2010).

Many variables influence the process of identity acquisition and maintenance. Erikson (1994) stated that "the process of identity formation emerges as an evolving configuration" (p. 125). While knowing that counselor professional identity formation never stops, one must consider how to intentionally and effectively guide the process. Kozina, Grabovari, De Stefano, and Drapeau (2010) demonstrated that practitioner identity evolves through deliberate tasks and actions aimed at helping counseling students develop particular attitudes, behaviors and beliefs. In addition to purposeful tasks, Gibson et al. (2010) asserted that the professional identity process occurs in stages and unique needs exist at different stages.

In recent years, research has become an important focus of the professional counseling community. The American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (2014) has emphasized the importance of

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counselors utilizing research to best inform their practices. Specifically, counselors who do not use techniques, procedures and modalities that are grounded in theory and have an empirical or scientific foundation must define the techniques as *unproven* or *developing*, explain the potential risks and ethical considerations of using such techniques, and take steps to protect clients from possible harm. This particular aspect of the ethical code introduces a unique aspect of counselors' beliefs, behaviors and attitudes concerning empirically-based practice, which counselors need to consciously recognize as a part of counselor professional identity—research identity (RI).

The definition of professional identity in counseling has historically captured more of the practitioner role. The concept of a scientist–practitioner identity has been frequently used within the field of psychology. Researchers define the identity of a scientist–practitioner as "regularly consuming and applying research findings in their practice; following a scientific methodological way of clinical thinking and practice; regularly evaluating their practices; conducting research and communicating findings; collaborating with researchers to produce clinically meaningful research" (Lampropoulos, Spengler, Dixon, & Nicholas, 2002, p. 232). The scientist–practitioner identity may likely share common elements with the RI dimension of counselor professional identity.

As the concept of RI has surfaced, research has led to new ideas about counselors' professional identity. Few researchers have attempted to define RI in the helping professions (Jorgensen & Duncan, 2015; Ponterotto & Grieger, 1999; Reisetter et al., 2004; Unrau & Grinnell, 2005). For doctoral counseling students, Reisetter et al. (2004) described the concept of RI as a mental and emotional connection with research, confidence in one's ability to consume research, desire to conduct a magnitude of research in the future, and identification within the larger research community. In the field of psychology, Ponterotto and Grieger (1999) defined RI as "how one perceives oneself as a researcher, with strong implications for which topics and methods will be important to the researcher. Naturally, one's RI both influences, and is influenced by, the paradigm from which one operates" (p. 52). Interestingly, Ponterotto and Grieger (1999) and Reisetter et al. (2004) both described the concept of RI without the use of references, highlighting the empirical attention still needed on the topic of RI.

In recent literature, Jorgensen and Duncan (2015) explored the meaning of RI in master's-level counselors through a grounded theory approach. The authors suggested the following theory of RI:

> (a) RI is considered an outcome that is initiated by the event of coming to understand what it means to be a counselor (professional identity); (b) RI is facilitated through the negotiation of internal facilitators, external facilitators, faculty impacts, and beliefs about research; (c) RI is affected by the broader contexts of undergraduate major and area of specialization; (d) RI is enhanced by accepting fluid conceptualizations of research and professional identity; and (e) RI is manifested through research behaviors, attitudes toward research, and a level that symbolizes the various degrees of a student's RI.

Based on their grounded theory, the authors offered a foundation for better understanding the concept of RI and suggested that future research explore the different levels of RI.

The purpose of this study was to focus on the dimension of research identity within the broader context of counselor professional identity, addressing gaps within the literature about the RI phenomenon. Counselors need a foundation for facilitating RI development. Also, counselors need a framework to fully understand the term and to apply previous findings more easily.

Method

The authors utilized a qualitative approach with a phenomenological framework to understand the phenomenon of master's-level counselors' RI. Researchers use a phenomenological approach to understand the subjective experiences of participants in relation to the topic under investigation (Creswell, 2013; Kopala & Suzuki, 1999). The authors examined the phenomenon and perspectives of 12 students who told stories about their RI and gave meaning to the different levels of experienced RI. The authors conducted individual interviews and a focus group to construct the meaning of levels of RI in multiple ways.

Researcher-as-Instrument and Potential Biases

Qualitative methodology requires researchers to be the instruments of investigation. Therefore, researchers must discuss their thoughts and feelings about the topic studied as a means of being transparent. The present authors conducted reflexive journaling throughout the study in order to minimize the impact of their biases on the data collection and data analysis processes (Hunt, 2011). The authors reflected in writing their thoughts and feelings about the topic, each interview, visual representations and the findings in scholarly articles during significant times in the research process.

Participants

Participants in the individual interviews and focus group were from two CACREP-accredited counseling programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, and located in the Midwestern United States. Researchers conducted 12 individual interviews during this study. Of the 12 participants (nine female, three male), five specialized in school counseling and seven specialized in clinical mental health. Five participants were at the midpoint of their counseling program (i.e., had completed 12–30 credits), and seven were at the end of their program (i.e., in the process of internship or had graduated within the last 6 months). The average age of participants was 29.25 (age range = 24–44).

Six participants (four female, two male) were involved in the focus group, with two being involved in both an individual interview and the focus group interview. All focus group participants were at the midpoint of their training program (i.e., had completed 12–30 credits). Three participants specialized in school counseling and three participants specialized in clinical mental health counseling. The authors avoided involving several of the participants in both data collection points in order to create potential for new meanings around RI to be constructed.

Procedure

The participants were initially contacted via e-mail, phone or in person to determine their suitability for participating in this study. The authors e-mailed potential participants a letter of invitation that featured the criteria for participation, asking them to contact the investigators if interested in being a participant. The following criteria were used to select participants for the individual interviews: identifying as master's-level counseling students with a school counseling or clinical mental health counseling focus, and at the midpoint or end of their training. However, the focus group interview only included students at the midpoint (i.e., had completed 12–30 credits) in their program.

Once participants were determined for both individual and focus group interviews, the participants completed a demographic sheet and consent form that described the purpose of the study and their rights as participants (i.e., ceasing participation at any point). Individual interviews lasted 35–60 minutes and were recorded via a digital voice recorder. The focus group lasted 60 minutes and also

was recorded. Digital files were immediately uploaded to a password-protected laptop once the interviews and focus group were completed. In order to ensure confidentiality, each participant received a pseudonym and all data (i.e., digital recordings, typed transcripts) were password protected.

Data Collection and Analysis

The authors utilized the following three data collection points in this study: individual interviews, a focus group and a visual representation. During the individual interview, participants answered questions from a semistructured protocol as well as questions about two articles that they were asked to read prior to their interview. During the focus group interview, participants answered questions from a semistructured protocol and drew a picture of what they imagined (i.e., visual representation) when they heard the word *research*. Importantly, visual representations facilitated a deeper co-construction of meaning relating to the levels of RI. According to Pain (2012), visual methods in research can build a trusting relationship with and between participants, encourage discussion, and facilitate the expression of abstract ideas. Visual representation also "allows for the creation of new insights using art either as the starting point for creative thought generation or as the means by which new meanings in the research can be expressed" (Poldma & Stewart, 2004, p. 146).

The researchers critiqued the data through a process suggested by Moustakas (1994) in conducting a phenomenological study. Bracketing of personal thoughts and feelings was done prior to and after each interview in order to ensure greater potential for objectivity and accurate representation of the data. The data were transcribed and critiqued through a primary coding process, which captured the essence of most sentences in the transcription. Horizontalization was carried out by viewing each transcript and finding ideas that seemed important to the interviewees. The researchers entered each idea into a spreadsheet in order to examine elements that occurred most frequently during the interviews, deriving meaning units to capture the overall common experiences of participants based on their most frequently described ideas. The data were merged into themes described through narrative definition and via direct quotes from each interview, leading to a contextual description that clarified each meaning unit.

In the focus group, participants were asked to draw a picture of what they imagined (i.e., visual representation) when they heard the word *research.* Participants shared their visual representation with the group and gave meaning to the picture by providing a narrative, which was transcribed and merged with the other data to provide more meaning to the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness Procedures

The researchers utilized researchers' epoche, member checking, prolonged engagement with the data, cross-checking data, triangulation and reflexive journaling as trustworthiness procedures during the data analysis. The first author sought transparence and credibility throughout the research process by bracketing thoughts and feelings associated not only with the broad topic (researcher epoche), but also with each interview and data analysis procedure (reflexive journaling). The first and second author met on a regular basis to examine their journal entries and cross-check entries with the results of the coding processes to ensure that participants' unique experiences were represented and to reflect on the overall research process (Creswell, 2013). Further, participants provided feedback in the process of member checking by examining their transcriptions, open codes and quotes supporting the themes. The researchers encouraged participants to review and edit, if necessary, their transcriptions, themes and quotes. Triangulation was used by comparing and integrating

data offered through individual interviews, the focus group and visual representation. During the process of converging findings from all data sources, the first author cross-checked and resynthesized information to create themes that captured the essence of what was being communicated through various data sources.

Results

The researchers established three stages of RI (i.e., stagnation, negotiation, stabilization) and five primary themes collapsed under each corresponding stage, with meaning assigned based on how participants experienced the different levels. According to Jorgensen and Duncan (2015), RI is experienced on a continuum with each master's-level counselor allocating different levels to the researcher dimension of professional identity. The stages of RI established in the current study further clarified different points on the broad RI continuum described by Jorgensen and Duncan (2015). Specifically, this research revealed more about the lower (stagnation), moderate (negotiation) and higher (stabilization) levels of RI by examining the participants' reactions to external facilitators, internal processes related to research, research behaviors, and beliefs and attitudes toward research.

The five primary themes included (1) external facilitators of lower levels of RI (e.g., messages from others, program elements, undergraduate education, professional standards); (2) external facilitators of higher levels of RI (e.g., messages from others, program elements, undergraduate education, professional standards); (3) internal facilitators of higher levels of RI (e.g., professional identity conceptualization, conceptualization of research, attitude toward research, beliefs about research, research behaviors); (4) internal facilitators of lower levels of RI (e.g., professional identity conceptualization, conceptualization of research, attitude toward research, beliefs about research, research behaviors); and (5) faculty as salient to the RI process (e.g., mentoring, talking about research, infusing research into courses, modeling research behaviors). The authors discuss the results through the broader categories of stages, using select examples of how primary themes describe each stage. Participants were given fictitious names in order to protect their confidentiality.

Stage One: Stagnation

The first level of RI was named the *stagnation stage* because participants seemed to be stagnating in the process of forming their RI. All participants expressed the realization that research is a part of their identity; however, participants in stage one seemed to do little with that realization. The primary themes connected to this stage included the following: internal facilitators of lower levels of RI, external facilitators of lower levels of RI and faculty as salient to the RI process.

Participants at stage one often described an internal state of confusion, dislike, avoidance of research and loyalty to their practitioner identity, and they articulated narrow definitions of research (i.e., internal facilitators of lower levels of RI). Participant Shelly provided a visual representation of her narrow definition of research and explained, "That is probably why I don't like research, because I think of . . . the science guy going cross-eyed." For Shelly, the word *research* stimulated a visual representation of a scientist and someone dissimilar to her. She described her conceptualization of a researcher by saying, "Ohhh, not me at all." Another participant, B.D., highlighted components of confusion, dislike and avoidance:

> As a researcher, I was more reinforced that I was terrible at it and that I didn't like it and, most of the research . . . taught to the class was such a joke and the appraisal

class . . . was really confusing for me because I don't like numbers and I didn't want to work with numbers and that was difficult along with the data entry. . . . I was taught the importance of [research] and somewhat understand what's going on, but that's probably it.

Kelsi discussed the dislike of research among individuals with lower levels of RI. She stated, "I think a lot of people, I hate to say it, are . . . like myself, they aren't the biggest fans of research."

Other internal facilitators of lower levels of RI were captured through participants describing a loyalty to their practitioner side. Dan stated, "I think from terms as a practitioner, . . . you could get caught up in spending too much time on research and not enough time working with clients or implementing the knowledge base that you have with clients."

Participants in the stagnation stage also discussed messages from others in the counseling profession, program elements and undergraduate major (i.e., external facilitators of lower levels of RI). Rocky shared that undergraduate major and program elements were components of lower levels of RI:

> [As an] undergrad, I had no clue what . . . the actual process of research . . . was. . . . I had no clue. . . . I don't know if it can be required, but I think in the counseling program research should be required.

Kelsi supported the idea of undergraduate education being a major external facilitator: "To tell the truth, I'm not the biggest fan on all of that, maybe because of my background. I don't have a psych background." Additionally, Bob indicated that messages from others were a part of lower levels of RI:

> I think the messages that I received were . . . important, but I don't think it was ever clearly defined or expected, without looking for further professional development or working for a doctoral program . . . you want to research . . . the areas that you are not familiar with, but I don't feel like that was ever clearly expressed. I know we are taught the research and research writing, but I just don't think it ever transpired into once you are a professional in the field, this is what's expected of you.

Lastly, participants often described faculty members as major contributors to lower levels of RI. Participants with low RI consistently described faculty teaching styles, silence around research, lack of modeling research behaviors, and lack of invitations to co-research and mentor students in research. Jackie described how faculty influenced her RI: "We weren't really ever invited to take part . . . we were never invited . . . and it was really never talked about." Nicole further emphasized the impact of messages from others as either directly stated or implied through behaviors:

> I got the impression that they didn't do research. . . . We didn't really talk about [research] a lot. In internship when I went out into my school district, I don't think anybody had been involved in research. I had two of them [faculty] that had been in the school counseling profession for about 20 years and I'm not sure if they did [research] at all.

Stage Two: Negotiation

The second and moderate level of RI was called the *negotiation stage* because participants described having to negotiate their love–hate relationship with research. This stage seemed to be a transition

stage, as participants described moving out of their lower level of RI due to having more confidence, realizing a need to take initiative and being mentored by others. All five primary themes were apparent in this stage.

Nicole discussed how her internal state shifted as she took charge of her thinking and found internal and external motivation to conduct research: "Just thinking about the benefits that research has, not just to me, but to the profession as a whole, to my colleagues and even [to] the schools I'm working for [is important]." Another participant expressed that her interest and curiosity in research helped her persevere through her fear of research, which seemed to be an important element of the moderate level of RI. Sally stated, "I'm apprehensive to an extent, but very curious and interested to learn more . . . to understand more how [research] can be [an] integral part [to] my work." In the focus group, Lisa constructed a visual representation and shared that her own curiosity has been the driving force for her level of RI:

> Mine [visual conceptualization of research] just started off with curiosity, interest, desire, and then a picture of a woman wondering about something, because to me that is research. You just have this desire . . . to know why. So, it's just that curiosity drives the interest.

In stage one of RI, participants clearly indicated loyalty to their practitioner side. In stage two, the transition of integrating research with practice became apparent through participants sharing more flexible views on how research can play a role in professional identity. Ellie gave the following example of this transition:

> I think counselors like working with people and helping people . . . that's why a lot of them go into the field. So it's if they see research brings benefit, I think that a lot of them would say it's worthwhile and beneficial, but it just depends on the person.

Nicole also validated that research has a place within professional identity conceptualization. She stated, "If you want to add some more credibility, or some more distinctions to your profession, I think that research does play an important role."

External facilitators of RI were important in the transition to a higher level of RI. An example of an external facilitator came in the form of learning alternative methodologies (e.g., qualitative research). Nicole stated:

> I think since I went through the program and . . . realized there were different types of research I could do [e.g., qualitative], I think my attitude now has become a lot better almost to the point where I'm not scared of it anymore. . . . I definitely think I'm more open to the possibility that I can do research and do well in my profession.

Another important part of the transition surfaced as participants described their conceptualization of research. In the stagnation stage, the participants' definition of research seemed to be narrow and something with which they could not relate. As participants transitioned in their RI, they started to understand research in a broader way and to see research as something with which they could relate. Shelly stated:

> I'm not a big person about research. I think it's just the word *research* that makes me kind of cringe, but really when you think about it, I think we all do research all the time; we just don't think about it that way.

Additionally, the behaviors that participants described at this stage were reflective of more than just consuming research, which was predominant at stage one. Sally shared the following:

> I read pretty much every article I can get my hands on, go to trainings all the time, and I took the initiative . . . to research material and do presentations and . . . I'm considering . . . [doing] more with research.

Stage Three: Stabilization

The third and highest level of RI for master's-level counseling students was the *stabilization stage*, aptly named due to the stabilization in RI that occurred at this stage as compared with stages one and two. The themes connected to this stage of RI include the following: internal facilitators of higher levels of RI, external facilitators of higher levels of RI and faculty as salient to RI. One of the strongest components of this stage was participants' internal state of RI. Participants' conceptualization of research was influenced by the realization that research includes multiple components, ranging from surveying scholarly articles to conducting original research. Additionally, participants with a stronger internal RI were less vulnerable to negative messages about research.

Participants described internal components that facilitated higher levels of RI, including persistence, dedication, curiosity, integration of practitioner and research identities, and broad conceptualization of research. Another key element that seemed to represent a higher level of RI was the way that participants conceptualized research. At stages one and two, participants were more focused on research being about numbers and an activity that *others* do. The shift in participants' conceptualization of research was demonstrated through the visual representation that focus group interviewees offered when hearing the word *research*. Participant Jessica constructed an image that manifested her conceptualization of research as being multidimensional.

Other important components of stage three were external facilitators of higher levels of RI described in the form of counselor education program elements, positive messages from others and undergraduate education that included research. Participant Henry gave an example of positive messages from others:

> I would say that [a message from a supervisor] was [an] emphasis to do research just because I . . . work in a profession where you . . . constantly have questions in the area and there is no possible way you can have the answer to everything, and so the only way to do that is to do the research behind it.

Participant Dan discussed how exposure to research in his undergraduate program was critical in his RI process. He stated:

> Until I took that undergraduate class, I had absolutely no interest in research and didn't understand any of the value to it and now all of a sudden when you begin to see statistics, valid statistics, mind you, but statistics that . . . reinforce your thought process or your program . . . [it] was a positive.

Other ideas that came up frequently were program elements and flexibility around structuring research to include interest. Lindsey discussed how this impacted her RI process:

> If you are interested in helping . . . clients, you should do [research] projects. You know, the program recognized that everybody has different interests and . . . they can't teach us everything, they . . . let us adapt what we researched to what we are interested in.

Other program elements related to faculty playing a role in the RI process. Participants in this stage did not place as much emphasis on the faculty role as those in lower levels of RI; this shift seemed related to individuals at higher stages having more of an internal drive to know themselves as researchers. Participant Bob described how faculty can facilitate higher levels of RI:

> [The] professor . . . was amazing. She is always continuing research and she likes to involve students . . . so she definitely pushed me and showed that continuing research is very important to professional development. So I would say that would be the number one factor for me.

Discussion

The findings of this research tell a story about the phenomenon of master's-level counseling students' RI. The story can be understood through viewing the process on a continuum that is fluid and comprised of interactions between the themes manifested in this study. The idea that research is a sub-identity of a counselor's professional identity was validated at all levels of RI. Participants frequently identified what it would take to reach higher levels of RI. This information was used to further understand the facilitation of the RI development process across stages.

Some participants believed that research is important and has its place, but those in the stagnation stage believed that others should produce the research (i.e., diffusion of responsibility). There are multiple aspects that comprise stage one of RI (see Table 1). Factors that facilitate a higher level of RI in students at stage one include the following: more infusion of research across courses and continuing education training, open and frequent communication about research, teaching more critical thinking skills, supervisors providing directives such as having supervisees read research articles, knowledge of alternative methodologies, challenging views of research and working to help them establish a new conceptualization, and more research programming, such as assignments that require research activities.

Participants described the negotiation stage as a "necessary evil." Although participants in this stage wanted to act on their belief that research is important to practice, they often described a struggle to make that happen. However, participants in the negotiation stage stated that they were more likely to engage in lower- to moderate-level research behaviors (e.g., reading articles, referencing research in papers and copresenting). Multiple aspects are comprised in this stage of RI (see Table 1). Counselors need to understand how to facilitate higher levels of RI. In addition to the factors mentioned in stage one, some factors that facilitate higher levels of RI include the following: establishing peer support for research activities, supervisors providing directives around and modeling research activities, mentoring students through research activities such as presenting

and conducting research, involving students in faculty research projects, and continuing to foster an evolution of conceptualization of research and professional identity.

Table 1

The Stages of RI Development in Master's-Level Counseling Students

Lower Level of RI *Stagnation* Stage	Moderate Level of RI *Negotiation* Stage	Higher Level of RI *Stabilization* Stage
Avoids research activities; mostly consumer-oriented (if anything); does not talk about research; skips the results section when reading articles	Starts to become active with research; consumes research (reads articles) more regularly; copresents at conferences; shows willingness to take some risk around research	Consumer and producer of research; conducts scholarly studies; pursues more rigorous research tasks such as scholarly publication; mentors others in their RI process; models research behaviors for others; demonstrates high levels of critical thinking, dedication, time management and persistence
Focuses more on using intuition to develop professionally; believes research is for researchers and practice is for counselors; believes research can take away from practice; has low research self-efficacy; does not believe research is a priority	Believes research may be important for some counselors, but does not have to be for all; research can produce positive outcomes and can enhance practice; makes gains in research self-efficacy	Believes research is core to the counseling practice; believes effective counseling practice does not come without research; believes research should be a priority; has high research self-efficacy
Mostly negative attitude toward research; says research is "stupid," "waste of time" and "not fun;" irritated by others with moderate-to-high levels of RI; low motivation (both internal and external) to research	Shows more internal motivation, but mainly motivated externally for research; ambivalent attitude toward research; says things like "it's a necessary evil"	Positive attitude toward research; says research is "exciting" and "crucial;" is frustrated by others' negative attitudes toward research; is predominantly internally motivated to research
Definition of research is narrow and science/math-oriented; supports the idea of not seeing self as researcher	Sees research in broader terms; starts to define research in a way they can connect with	Views research as broad and all encompassing; sees self within conceptualization of research
Sees self solely as practitioner; does not see self as researcher	RI is being negotiated; starts to consider seeing self as researcher; practitioner identity remains most salient	Views self as both a researcher and counselor; has negotiated and integrated the two identities

Participants with the highest levels of RI were in the stabilization stage. These participants expressed knowing themselves as both a counseling student and a researcher. Internal and external factors contributed to participants' ability to persist past elements in stages one and two to progress into stage three. In addition to all of the previously mentioned factors, some important elements that

may help master's-level counseling students stay at stage three include the following: involvement with faculty research projects, requiring a thesis, mentoring toward the overall goal of publication, creating student research groups, assigning projects that elicit knowledge of application of research, supervisors collaborating with supervisees on research projects, employment settings requiring data be gathered and research be conducted by counselors; and knowledge and skills in qualitative or quantitative research (or both), and presenting findings from research at conferences.

Implications

There are multiple implications from this research for counselor education programs, counselor educators and counseling students. The most profound and impactful aspects of the RI process were the external processes. The external components of program elements and faculty were foundational in how participants viewed themselves, others and the counseling profession. The outcome was manifested in levels of RI that were captured through three proposed stages.

Counselor education programs. Participants often stressed how important it was to RI development to be exposed to research early in their studies, exposed to alternative research methodologies in order to find common ground with research (e.g., qualitative research), and exposed to flexibility to infuse student interests in meeting research assignments. Additionally, participants often talked about the format of research courses and used words such as *confusing*, *irrelevant* and *rushed* to describe their feelings toward research courses. This information may indicate a need for counseling programs to reestablish how these courses are assigned and taught. Participants in this study shared that research courses were taught by faculty in other departments. Students in the counseling field may benefit from learning research from counselor educators so that research and practice are connected in more meaningful and practical ways.

Importantly, master's-level counseling programs may want to consider offering a qualitative research course. Previous literature has demonstrated that exposure to qualitative methodology helps counseling students consider themselves researchers (Jorgensen & Duncan, 2015; Reisetter et al., 2004). Participants also discussed feeling connected to research that allowed them to interact with people. Often, barriers to higher levels of RI in participants related to the belief that research is only for scientists who know a lot about numbers and statistics.

Lastly, it may be important for master's-level programs to create a programmatic structure that supports the integration of research into each course. According to Lambie and Vaccaro (2011), the research training environment is a crucial element in the process of students becoming confident with their research abilities. An integrative approach also may allow students more of a platform for building a relationship with research and finding something of interest that is not fixed within the parameters of research courses. This approach also supports a process for moving students along their RI development by assisting them in starting to identify research interests, then looking at the literature to examine gaps, and integrating those interests and gaps into ideas for original research.

Counselor educators. Consistent with previous research (Gelso, 2006; Jorgensen & Duncan, 2015), several participants talked about faculty playing a major role in how they came to know themselves as researchers. This theme surfaced at each stage of RI and was so frequently mentioned that it was considered an exclusive theme outside of other external facilitators. The findings from this study revealed concrete ways counselor educators can promote higher levels of RI in their students. Some simple tasks include faculty talking about their research processes in class or during meetings with

students. Participants believed that the lack of conversation about research indicated that faculty members were not engaged in research or that they did not want students to know about or to be a part of their research. Other tasks may include taking students through the steps of critically analyzing research articles. Additional activities include having students copresent at conferences and co-research with faculty, and mentoring students' research processes.

Ultimately, counselor educators may want to consider examining their own level of RI. This analysis may help break down barriers to effectively facilitating student RI development. Counselor educators' transparency about their research may be enough to facilitate a higher level of RI in students and help them realize a need to build internal motivation to embrace research as a part of their professional identity as a counselor.

Counselors-in-training. Other implications are directed toward counselors-in-training. Counselors' ownership of their RI is essential in the process of reaching higher levels of RI. Participants indicated that their internal processes were critical in how they processed and applied information that could support and facilitate their RI. They further indicated that a strong internal RI allowed them, or could allow them, to take better advantage of research, better apply research to practice and ultimately be a better practitioner.

Limitations

The limitations of this study relate to inherent issues with qualitative methodology. One, this research cannot be generalized due to the nature of its methodology, small sample size and the geographic location of the participants. Two, errors may have occurred during the research process due to researcher bias. Likewise, the researchers may have been biased in labeling the levels of research. Although the stages were based on information conveyed by the participants, the participants did not specifically categorize themselves in the levels proposed by the researchers.

Areas for Future Research

Future researchers may consider developing a scale that would objectively measure the stages of RI. An RI development scale would assist counselor educators with objectively measuring learning outcomes and in evaluating the counseling program's effectiveness in executing accreditation research standards. Rowan and Wulff (2007) wrote that using qualitative methods to inform scale development is perceived as appropriate and sufficient within the research community. Particularly, they suggested that "analyzing data generated through interviews informs the survey designed for larger samples" (p. 450). The current study serves as a platform to move from subjective to more objective ways of assessing RI in master's-level counseling students. Additionally, RI within the context of other professions could be examined after establishing a valid and reliable scale.

Conclusion

The current findings contribute to the goal of constructing a universal understanding of professional counselor identity development—particularly the RI dimension. Previous literature has primarily focused on behaviors, beliefs and attitudes that relate mostly to the practitioner side of counselor professional identity (Auxier et al., 2003; Brott & Myers, 1999; Hanna & Bemak, 1997; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2002; Mellin, Hunt, & Nichols, 2011; Woodside, Oberman, Cole, & Carruth, 2007). The current research contributes to what is already known about how to develop practitioner identity. Further, as the counseling profession seeks greater recognition within the medical and human services communities, professional counselors must connect their work to activities that are

considered more research-oriented. An understanding of RI stages and development may further assist in this process.

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of this manuscript.

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