Professional Identity of Counselors in Mexico: A Commentary

Viviana Demichelis Machorro
Antonio Tena Suck

The authors conducted an exploratory study using cultural domain analysis to better understand the meaning that advanced students and professional counselors in Mexico give to their professional identity. More similarities than differences were found in the way students and professionals define themselves. The most relevant concepts were empathy, ethics, commitment, versatility, training and support. Students gave more weight to multiculturalism and diversity, whereas professionals prioritized commitment and responsibility at work. Prevention did not appear as a relevant concept, posing challenges for professional counselor training programs in Mexico.

Keywords: professional identity, multiculturalism, ethics, prevention, counselor training, Mexico

In the field of professional counseling, it is important to consider the benefit of developing a strong professional identity. Initiative 20/20: Vision for Counseling's Future, represented by influential organizations such as the American Counseling Association (ACA), the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), and the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC), identifies principles that must be developed in order to strengthen the counseling profession (ACA, n.d.). These principles include sharing a common professional identity and presenting the counseling profession in a unified way. CACREP (2009) recognizes the relevance of promoting professional development in counseling programs; the organization's standards were written to ensure that counseling student development is congruent with professional identity, as well as the necessary knowledge and skills to practice counseling effectively and efficiently.

In Mexico, steps have been taken toward developing such standards. The Mexican Association for Counseling and Psychotherapy (AMOPP), founded in 2008, has stated in its mission and objectives the promotion of counselor identity and stimulation of professional development (AMOPP, 2014). However, the process of defining professional identity for counselors has complex aspects that imply a great challenge for the Mexican counseling guild (Calva & Jiménez, 2005; Portal, Suck, & Hinkle, 2010).

First, there are few Mexican university programs that train counselors. The only such Mexican graduate program is the master in counseling (maestría en orientación psicológica) at Universidad Iberoamericana, which started in fall 2003 and was awarded CACREP accreditation in 2009. This program prepares students in prevention, evaluation and intervention using an integrative approach that includes theories and techniques, promotion of multicultural sensibility, and a focus on vulnerable populations (Universidad Iberoamericana, n.d.-a). Most students in this master in counseling program have a bachelor's degree in psychology, which makes for a mixed psychologist/counselor identity that is not easy to separate, and that is likely experienced as a psychological specialty by faculty, students and the general public.

Viviana Demichelis Machorro is a doctoral student at Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. Antonio Tena Suck is the Director of the Psychology Department at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. Correspondence can be addressed to Viviana Demichelis Machorro, Universidad Iberoamericana, Departamento de Psicología, Prolongación Paseo de la Reforma 880, Lomas de Santa Fe, 01219 México Distrito Federal, viviana.demichelis@amopp.org.

In contrast to countries like the United States and Canada, where a bachelor's degree is awarded first and students professionalize afterward at the graduate level, in Mexico, students professionalize at the undergraduate level, which promotes professional identity at this point. Thus, in Mexico the possibility of studying for an undergraduate professional program in counseling does not exist, which contributes to the difficulty of counseling being recognized as an independent profession.

There are plenty of reasons to study the professional identity of counselors in Mexico. First, counseling awareness within the community could be increased, making counseling accessible to a population that needs quality mental health services. The Mexican Poll of Psychiatric Epidemiology (ENEP) of the National Institute of Psychiatry reveals that 28.6% of the population presents some type of psychiatric disorder at some point in life, mostly anxiety (14.3%), followed by the use of illegal substances (9.2%) and affective disorders (9.1%). Nevertheless, despite this high incidence of mental health problems, only 10% of the population that presents with a mental disorder receives the attention it needs (Medina-Mora et al., 2003).

Secondly, there is limited professional literature in Mexico regarding professional counseling. Searching behavioral science databases revealed only one reference in a Mexican book regarding psychologists' professional identity (Harsh, 1994) and no articles about counselors' professional identity. If the professional identity of counselors in Mexico were more defined, it could help prospective students who are interested in studying counseling. It also could help practicing counselors form a solid base to serve as a platform to strengthen and enrich their professional behavior and clarify their professional identity. Neukrug (2007) has stated that when counselors find out who they are, they will know their limits and relationships with other professions. Therefore, the authors explored the professional identity of counselors in Mexico to better understand their definitive characteristics.

Professional identity, according to Balduzzi and Corrado (2010), is the definition one makes about self in relation to work and an occupational guild. It begins with training, during which professional identity can be promoted or obstructed, and includes interactions with others as well as modeling. Counselors begin to develop professional identity as they are trained (Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003; Brott & Myers, 1999), integrating personal characteristics in the context of a professional community (Nugent & Jones, 2009). Brott and Myers (1999) studied how professional identity is developed among school counseling graduate students in the United States and reported that counselors develop an identity that serves as a reference for professional decisions and assumed roles. These researchers used grounded theory to explain the identity development process of counselors in training. First, students go through a stage of dependence to attain the stage of independence at which the locus of control is internal and the counseling student has the opportunity for self-evaluation without external evaluation. In this advanced stage, experience is integrated with theory, joining personal and professional identities.

To analyze the development of professional identity in counseling students in the United States, Auxier et al. (2003) developed their research from a constructivist model that assumed reality is socially developed, determined by the place where it is elaborated and based on the participants' experience. They developed the model of "recycling identity formation processes" (p. 32). This model explains that for constructing an identity, a person needs to go through (a) conceptual learning via classes and lectures; (b) experiential learning by practices, dynamics and internship; and (c) external evaluation from teachers, supervisors, coworkers and clients.

Nelson and Jackson (2003) wanted to better understand the development of professional identity among Hispanic counseling students in the United States. They conducted a qualitative study and found seven relevant topics: knowledge, personal growth, experience, relationships, achievements, costs, and perceptions of the

counseling profession (Nelson & Jackson, 2003). Although the results were congruent with other findings, such as the need to be accepted and included, relationships such as those available from caring faculty or the support of family and friends were identified as meaningful factors that contribute to formation of a professional identity.

Similarly, du Preez and Roos (2008) used social constructivism to analyze the development of professional identity in South African students between the fourth and last year of their studies as undergraduate counselors. Participants elaborated on visual and written projects regarding their professional development training. Through an analysis of this work, four professional identity themes were identified: capacity for uncertainty, greater self-knowledge, self-reflection and growth (du Preez & Roos, 2008).

Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) explained that identity development implies progress of attitudes about responsibility, ethical standards, and membership in professional associations. According to the Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992), a counselor's identity differs from other professional identities because a therapeutic self is shaped by a mixture of professional and personal development. The researchers explained that professional identity is a combination of professional self (e.g., roles, decisions, applying ethics) and personal self (e.g., values, morals, perceptions) that create frameworks for decision making, problem-solving patterns, attitudes toward responsibilities, and professional ethics.

In one of the few quantitative investigations on the topic, Yu, Lee and Lee (2007) used the concept of "collective self-esteem" (p. 163) as a synonym for collective and professional identity. They conducted a study to learn whether the collective self-esteem of counselors influences or mediates their work satisfaction and how they relate to clients. The researchers found that "job dissatisfaction is negatively related to greater levels of private collective self-esteem, and in turn, greater private collective self-esteem is positively related to better client relationships" (p. 170). Based on their conclusions, it is important to study the professional identity of counselors in Mexico, who must work from a place of job satisfaction and good client relationships in order to successfully address their clients' social needs.

Hellman and Cinamon (2004) performed a series of semi-structured interviews for 15 professional school counselors with a consensual qualitative research (CQR) strategy to classify counselors through the stages of Super's (1992) career theory: exploration, establishment, maintaining and specialization. The classification was made according to the perceptions the researchers described about counseling, professional identity, work patterns, and resources and barriers at work. In the beginning stages of their career, counselors describe school counseling as a job or a role, but later they consider counseling a profession. Furthermore, counselors start by depending on external recognition, specific techniques, and highly structured programs. As they become more experienced, counselors gain self-confidence and rely more on their professional judgment.

In general, researchers have described subjective experience to explain the development of professional identity. Furthermore, findings suggests that counselors in their identity development gain more self-knowledge, confidence in their abilities and judgment, knowledge and involvement in their profession and its standards, and a combination of personal and professional characteristics and experiences.

Method

Cultural domain with free listing was chosen as the data collection technique. Cultural domain is "the set of concepts chosen by memory through a reconstructive process that allows participants to have an action plan as well as the subjective evaluation of the events, actions or objects, and it has gradually become one of the most

powerful techniques to evaluate the meaning of concepts" (Valdez, 2010, p. 62). It has been accepted in Mexico and applied principally in social psychology and education to define and delineate several concepts such as psychologist (García-Silberman & Andrade, 1994); love, men and women (Hernández & Benítez, 2008); parenting (Medina et al., 2011); the rich and poor (Valdez, 2010); family (Andrade, 1994, 1996; Camacho & Andrade, 1992); and corruption (Avendaño & Ferreira, 1996), among others. This methodology was chosen because "professional identity" is a subjective concept to which different meanings are granted based on personal experiences; the idea was to show the concepts related to the meaning counselors give to their identity.

In this study, the authors posed the following question: What meaning do Mexican counselors give to their professional identity? The dependent variable was professional identity and the attributive variable was level of preparation (student or professional). The study was transversal (data recovery at a unique time frame) and descriptive.

Participants

The participants in the study included advanced students in at least their third semester in the master's counseling program at Universidad Iberoamericana and professional counselors who graduated from the program at least one year ago. Fifteen of 17 advanced students (88.23%) participated, including 3 men and 12 women with an average age of 29.40 years. Twelve of 29 graduates (41%) participated, including 1 man and 11 women, with an average age of 42.75 years.

Survey Development and Procedure

Each participant was asked to list 10 words or brief terms to describe the concept *counselor professional identity.* Afterward, participants were asked to rank each word from 1–10, assigning 1 to the characteristic word considered the most relevant and 10 to the word considered least relevant. Advanced counseling students were given the survey in their classrooms and graduate counselors were sent the survey via e-mail. The surveys were analyzed following Valdez (2010), obtaining the definitions with the semantic weight (M), for both students and professionals, considering the frequency with which the words were mentioned, as well as the assigned rankings. The authors used a mathematical procedure called *el valor M total* [Total M Value] (VMT; Valdez, 2010), which entails multiplying the frequency of occurrence times the weight of each defining word. Next, a cross-multiplication was done, considering the highest VMT as 100% in order to obtain the semantic distance between each concept and the stimulus concept (i.e., counselor professional identity). This procedure is referred to as FMG (Valdez, 2010).

Results

For the students, the defining terms for the stimulus *counselor professional identity*, listed in the order of the frequency and relevance with which the participants used and ranked them, were as follows:

> empathic, understands, sensitive, ethical, honest, sincerity, fair, prepared, knowledge, trained, updated, flexible, adapts, support, help, backup, listening, human, warm, congruence, authentic, mental health, well-being, trustable, integrative, responsible, commitment, intervening, implementing, action, professionalism, respect, tolerance, multicultural, contextualized, diversity, observer, acceptance, non-judgment, structure, organizes, collaboration, design, planning, creativity, patience, goal recognition, positive view, growth, development, contention, service attitude, dedication, different, brief, social commitment, interdisciplinary, reflective, analyzes, guides, communicates, open, wide view, curious, scientific, relationship, psychotherapist, therapist, educates, prudent, diagnoses, prevention,

dynamic, specialized, assertive, personal, practical, resilient, facilitator, personal therapy, strategic and consultant.

Consensually, the researchers separated these concepts into semantic categories, taking into account terms that are synonyms or that have a very similar meaning, leaving 57 definitions. Similarly, those concepts with more semantic weight were detected, resulting in the Semantic Association Memory (SAM) group according to Valdez (2010), which refers to the 15 categories with the most relevance (M total). This process is done considering frequency and weight. This group includes 17 categories since the last 3 present the same value. Table 1 shows terms that counseling students used to define counselor identity, weighted in order of relevance.

Table 1

Counseling Students' Identity

Semantic Defining Categories	VMT	FMG
Empathic, understands, sensitive	76	100%
Ethical	52	68.42%
Honest, sincere, fair	52	68.42%
Prepared, knowledge, updated, trained	44	57.89%
Flexible, adapts	43	56.57%
Support, help, backup	35	46.05%
Listening	33	43.42%
Warm, human	32	42.10%
Congruence, authentic	29	38.15%
Mental health, well-being	25	32.89%
Trustable	25	32.89%
Integrative	23	30.26%
Responsible, commitment	21	27.64%
Intervening, implementing, action	17	22.36%
Professionalism	16	21.05%
Respect, tolerance	16	21.05%
Multicultural, contextualized, diversity	16	21.05%

Note. VMT = Total M Value; FMG = semantic distance between the defining words.

For graduated professional counselors, the defining terms for the stimulus *counselor professional identity*, listed in the order of frequency with which participants used and ranked them, were as follows:

empathic, commitment, dedicated, responsible, ethical, serves vulnerable populations, social service, prepared, experienced, updated, supervised, studious, research, listening, authentic, genuine, congruent, support, assistance, orientation, guidance, honesty, integrity, integrative,

trustable, educates, informative, professional, versatile, adaptable, flexible, active, guide, creative, discipline, work, therapeutic relationship, curious, healthy, motivated, reflective, framing, intelligent, strength, ecological, humble, sensitize, acceptance, verbal, focused, aware, systemic, problem-solving, catalyze, assertiveness, decision-making, practical, positive, growth, development, fair, influence, self-knowledge, respectful, tolerant, reflects, cheerful and certified.

Once more, the defining words were classified into semantic categories, obtaining 48 definitions, as well as detecting those with the most semantic weight, resulting in a SAM group with the 15 most relevant categories. The authors derived these categories by considering higher frequencies and weight. The participants indicated that being *empathic* was the closest concept to counselor professional identity. The authors established *empathic* as FMG = 100, and cross-multiplied the other concepts to obtain their distance. Table 2 shows terms that professional counselors used to define counselor identity, weighted in order of relevance.

Table 2

Professional Counselors' Identity

Semantic Defining Categories	VMT	FMG
Empathic	62	100%
Commitment, dedicated, responsible	54	87.09%
Ethical	48	77.41%
Serves vulnerable population, social service	46	74.19%
Prepared, experienced, updated, supervised, studious, research	36	58.06%
Listening	34	54.83%
Authentic, genuine, congruent	28	45.16%
Support	27	43.54%
Guidance, orientation	24	38.70%
Honesty, integrity	24	38.70%
Integrative	23	37.09%
Trustable	22	35.08%
Educates, informative	22	35.08%
Professional	18	29.03%
Flexible, versatile, adapts	16	25.80%

The resulting defining concepts also were divided into two categories: (a) the way counselors work and (b) the way counselors are. The authors believe it is important to understand how counselors actually perceived their role in their work (e.g., professional behaviors, attitudes, approaches, roles, and functions) and also the way they identify themselves personally (e.g., characteristics and abilities; see Table 3).

Table 3

Counselors' Roles and Characteristics

The Way Counselors Work	The Way Counselors Are
Ethical	Listener
Social service, serves vulnerable population	Empathic, understands, sensitive
Preparation, training, up-to-date, supervision, studying	Committed, dedicated, responsible
	Warm, human
Professionalism	Authentic, genuine, congruent
Educates, informs	Respectful, tolerant
Support, helps	Honest, integrity
Guidance	Trustable
Mental health, well-being	Flexible, versatile, adaptable
Multiculturalism, contextualizes, diversity	
Integrative	

Discussion

It is possible to distinguish professional identity with common themes that begin during counselor training and continue as a process (Auxier et al., 2003; Balduzzi & Corrado, 2010; Brott & Myers, 1999). More similarities than differences were found comparing students and graduates.

For students and professionals, empathy occupies the most relevant place when describing counselor identity. It is interesting to observe how counselors, students and professionals prioritize values and concepts that come from a humanistic approach (e.g., empathy, authenticity, being genuine, congruent, warmth). This finding coincides with what Hansen (2003) expressed in that the counseling profession has its roots in the humanistic model, which is an undeniable part of its identity. This is also congruent with the values that the Universidad Iberoamericana promotes with students.

Ethics appear predominantly in both sets of participants, likely since professional identity and ethics are closely related (Nugent & Jones, 2009; Ponton & Duba, 2009; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Responsibility and commitment, as well as training and preparation, appear to be important defining words for counseling students and graduates, indicating that these concepts are considered fundamental. Furthermore, students and graduates consider flexibility as one of a counselor's professional identity characteristics, which relates to versatility in counselor roles and functions. Attending to the vulnerable population and social commitment were prominent for graduates, which fortunately matches well with the mission of counseling at their university (Universidad Iberoamericana, n.d.-b).

According to the data, the concept of *prevention* does not emerge as a direct priority that Mexican counselors believe distinguishes them. Students mention this concept, but just once and with low relevance; however, it does not reveal itself at all as a defining term for professionals. This finding does not correlate well with actual course descriptions within the counseling master's degree program (Universidad Iberoamericana, n.d.-a); therefore, changes in the program curricula may be needed. Students identified multiculturalism and diversity in the description of their professional identity; however, graduates did not. This distinction could be related to the recent teaching of this topic in Mexico and is expected to increase in the new generation of graduates.

It is important to note the limitations to this preliminary descriptive study. The sample was limited to 27 participants and no in-depth interviews were done in order to more comprehensively understand student and counselor perceptions. There is no basis for suggesting that the results can be generalized to other counselor populations, given that the study was specific to the particular context of one program at a private university. It is imperative to continue the study of counselor professional identity in Mexico with more participants and in-depth interviews.

There are several implications for Mexican counselor educators in regard to the development of counselor professional identity. First, there is the understanding that counselors are models in their professional activities including writing, affiliations and certification. It is imperative that educators invite students to get involved in national and international associations; promote practice, research and writing; and exalt the relevance of counselor certification.

Prevention—on the one hand a historic activity of many counselors—has proven to be a less important to Mexican counselors. To enhance this concept, the university curricula design may need to emphasize this topic in the thematic content of the program's courses. Practica and internships might as well include prevention strategies in the student's roles and functions. Furthermore, an elective course about prevention program design and implementation could be offered. On the other hand, it may be that prevention is a good idea, but not actually practiced by professional counselors because people tend to not pay for preventive services.

In summary, counseling students and graduates in Mexico share a common professional identity self-described as empathic, ethical, committed, versatile, trained and supportive. Efforts should be made to continue enhancing counseling core values as the profession continues to grow in Mexico, as well as internationally.

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