Graduate Student Symposium Proposal

The Business of Therapy: Examining the Process of Working in Private Practice

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January 8, 2015
Rationale

Canadian counsellors are employed in diverse settings, including schools, community agencies, and private practice (Smith and Drodge, 2001). As a result, their professional roles vary from intake and assessment, career and academic advising, crisis counselling, group counselling, and professional development and administrative duties (Smith and Drodge, 2001; Gazzola and Smith, 2007). With increasing diversity in professional roles and responsibilities, counsellors have not developed a shared sense of professional identity (Gazzola and Smith, 2007; Alves and Gazzola, 2013). Research has examined independent aspects of professional identity including collective identity of the counselling profession (Alves et al., 2013; Gazzola, Smith, King-Andrews and Kearney, 2010), professional identity (Alves and Gazzola, 2011; Swickert, 1997), roles and practices (Alves et al., 2013; Gazzola et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2001), and theories of professional identity development (Gibson, Dollarhide and Moss, 2010; Moss, Gibson and Dollarhide, 2014; Ronnestad and Skovholt, 2003). However, there is limited distinction between the experiences of counsellors in public agencies and private practice, despite the differences in their professional responsibilities. The purpose of this study is to understand the development of the professional identity of private practice therapists, with the central areas examining professional roles, identity, values, and changes throughout career.

Methods and Objective

Grounded theory is an inductive approach to research, where theories and hypotheses are generated from the data, or from the ground up, and can be used to understand social behaviour (Engward, 2013). Grounded theory is used when one seeks to explain a process (Creswell, 2012). Using a grounded theory approach for this study will allow for understanding of the development and changes in professional identity experienced among private practice therapists. The purpose of the systematic design is to develop a theory that describes the processes of a topic, and is finalized with a diagram and theory (Creswell, 2013). This approach was selected because it provides the opportunity to explore the behavioural and emotional process counsellors undertake on their path to becoming private practice therapists. The purpose of this grounded theory study is to understand the development of the professional identity of private practice therapists. This study will examine what behavioural or emotional processes describe the amalgamation of two careers, therapist and business owner, into the lifestyle of the private practice therapist. The central research question guiding the current study is “What process describes the development of the professional identity of the private practice therapist?” 10-15 private practice therapists will be interviewed using semi-structured interview styles. The following research questions will guide this study:  1. How has the amalgamation of therapist and business owner into private practice therapist influenced your identity?  2. What dilemmas have you experienced as a result of entering private practice?  3. What professional roles do you employ as a counsellor and as a business owner?  4. What personal and professional values guide your work?

In the present study, rigor will be controlled using theoretical sampling, and the constant comparative method, thereby ensuring that the data accurately reflects participants'
experiences (Kolb, 2012). Theoretical memoing will be used to account for researcher bias during the data analysis stage, specifically open, axial and selective coding (Creswell, 2013). The participant sample will be representative of both Masters and Doctoral graduates, consequently increasing the ability to generalize the results to a greater helper population.

**Significance**

The implications of this study are multi-faceted, influencing institutions, professional groups and individuals. Professional identity, including professional roles and personal values, are fundamental to the perceived success of the counsellor and of the profession. Empirical evidence on the topic of the professional identity of counsellors in various settings is limited (Alves and Gazzola, 2011; Gibson, Dollarhide and Moss, 2010), and as a result professionals have no validated guidance and knowledge base on this subject matter. This study will contribute to the further understanding of private mental health professionals, and their changes in identity, as well as the research on female entrepreneurs. The framework created as part of this study will provide a foundation for future research to examine the changes therapists undergo throughout their transition into private practice, including their experiences, expertise, and challenges. This is of particular importance to Canadian Universities that offer clinical and counselling graduate programs, as it will allow faculty and administration to provide current insight into the world of private practice to their students. “Professional programs that do not adapt to the current needs of the profession and the larger society will soon disappear, as students look elsewhere for an education that meets their needs” (Smith and Drodge, 2001, p. 239). It will better prepare students for the self-employed field of private therapy, and will have a direct influence on the younger generation of therapists who are in the ambivalent stage of pursuing private practice employment. Furthermore, this study will examine the feminist component of professional identity and the professional development of women. Historically, women have fought to become equal members in the workforce. Presently, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions (as cited in Schuh, 2014). Therefore, it is essential to determine which qualities and influences impacted women to prosper in private practice, becoming entrepreneurs. Moreover, this study will provide novel insight and add to the literature on what it means to be an independent, self-sufficient woman in today’s society.

The presentation format of this study will be a traditional format.