

# Research

## Themes in Therapist and Counselor Development

THOMAS M. SKOVHOLT and MICHAEL HELGE RONNESTAD

*This study focused on therapist-counselor development. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with 100 participants served as the data-gathering method. Data from this study were first used to develop a stage model. Then, 20 themes of therapist-counselor development were extracted from the 120 pages of narrative stage data. The themes were extracted jointly by the two authors through a set of qualitative research procedures. These themes are described within the categories of primary characteristic themes, process descriptor themes, source of influence themes, and secondary characteristic themes. Professional development topics addressed include professional individuation, methods of renewal, conceptual orientation, measures of success, learning processes, boundary regulation, and impact of professional elders.*

A useful way of understanding client distress and psychopathology is to put it in a larger context that includes contrasting pathology and healthy development. In a parallel fashion, dysfunctional therapist-counselor behaviors can be understood in a larger context, which also includes positive professional functioning. Whereas dysfunctional therapist-counselor behaviors such as incompetence, boundary violations, impairment, and burnout have received significant attention recently (e.g., Schoener & Gonsiorak, 1988; Wood, Klein, Cross, Lammers, & Elliott, 1985), much less attention has been paid to the elements that describe normative development of therapists and counselors over the multiple decades of an average career.

It is, in fact, intrinsically appealing for therapists and counselors to understand the elements that contribute to their own professional growth and development. Often, a first focus is getting accepted by a graduate training program. This is quickly replaced by a focus on completing the training program and graduating. Then comes a first professional job and licensing or certification. Next, a professional focus emerges as one's professional career continues. Although we tend to focus on these immediate goals in our own professional lives and in the research literature—for example, changes in competence between beginning practicum and advanced practicum—there is also the much larger arena of overall professional growth and development. For example, there are questions such as "What are normative challenges that confront individuals at different career points? What contributes to optimal growth? Are there stages of development? How does one become a gifted therapist-counselor? What produces stagnation?" We have personally asked these

questions as part of our own attempt to grow professionally. We have also examined the professional literature while attempting to answer these questions (e.g., Benner, 1982; Gilligan, 1982; Henry, Sims, & Spray, 1971; May, 1976; Perry, 1981; Super, 1980).

Within the supervision literature, authors of research studies have attempted to examine elements of professional growth. Worthington (1987) reviewed and summarized many of these studies. Another focus in the (mainly conceptual) literature has been on the concept of developmental stages. In the 1970s and 1980s, stage models of practitioner development were constructed by Ard (1973), Friedman and Kaslow (1986), Grater (1985), Loganbill, Hardy, and Delworth (1982), Herroid (1989), Hess (1987), Hill, Charles, and Reed (1981), Jablon (1987), Littrell, Lee-Borders, and Lorenz (1979), Patton (1986), Stoltenberg (1981), Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987), and Yogev (1982). Predecessors to these models are those of Fleming (1953) and Hogan (1964). A more generic professional model that concentrates on increases in expertise has been formulated by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) and applied by Benner (1982).

Lerner (1986) provided a comprehensive review of the concept of psychological development. Although the theoretical nature of the concept of development allows for great variability in concept attributes, Lerner (1986) pointed out that there are certain minimal features to the concept of development regardless of philosophical and theoretical orientation. These are that (a) development always implies change of some sort, (b) the change is organized systematically, and (c) the change involves succession over time.

Another issue concerns developmental continuity-discontinuity. Lerner (1986) provided a useful overview of perspectives on this issue, which is highly relevant for the study of professional development, particularly if one assumes a stage position (e.g., Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982). Critics of the stage concept generally question the universality, the hierarchical nature, the invariance, or the qualitatively different nature of changes. Borders (1989) and Holloway (1987) have provided critiques of therapist-counselor development models.

The empirical and conceptual work (overall literature) cited earlier has contributed to expanding the knowledge of the structure, process, and goals of supervision and professional development. Yet, there are also limitations: The conclusions have been

infrequently research based. Seldom has qualitative methodology been used, and consequently, there is an absence of the rich descriptive information that researchers can glean from intensive interviews. Finally, the focus has been on growth during training, and little attention has been paid to the many working years beyond graduate school. In addition, there has been little examination of the impact of personal life on professional functioning (Guy, 1987).

The goal of the current study was to address such issues in a qualitative examination of the stage construct of development. The study was also designed to go beyond the limitations of stages to consider broader themes of development, as well as the dimension of development versus stagnation (Skovholt & Ronnestad, in press). The study has the following characteristics: The inquiry covers the professional life span. The analysis takes into account professional and personal sources of influence. The method is qualitative, with use of semistructured interviews and follow-up feedback from informants. The inquiry generates knowledge pertaining to a variety of issues. These include challenges, emotional reactions, attitudes toward work, influential factors in development, learning method, perceptions of role and working style, conceptual ideas used, and measures of success and satisfaction. These issues served as a point of entry for data gathering and data analysis.

## METHOD

This study was carried out using qualitative methodology. Hoshmand (1989) and Patton (1991) contrast this method and the quantitative approach. Inductive analysis (Patton, 1990) served as the overall qualitative focus. Our specific method of inquiry, a modified version of what has been labeled the "constant comparative method of analysis" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 101–116) or "Grounded Theory Methodology" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), involved a continual reexamination and modification of the data. This research study was conducted over 5 years (1986–1990).

### Participants

The research participants were 100 therapists and counselors from the first year of graduate school to 40 years beyond graduate school who were divided by education and experience into five groups. We chose a total of 20 members for each group so that we could describe broad themes and avoid the error of describing only individual differences. The five groups were (a) first-year graduate students who were in one of four graduate programs in two universities; (b) advanced doctoral students in one of three graduate programs in two departments of the University of Minnesota; (c) practitioners with the doctorate and approximately 5 years of postdoctoral experience; (d) practitioners with the doctorate and approximately 15 years of postdoctoral experience; and (e) practitioners with the doctorate and approximately 25 years of postdoctoral experience. Participants in the last three groups had graduate training from a variety of programs with a variety of work experiences. This use of education and experience in therapy-counseling as the developmental level variables is similar to the conceptualizations of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) in their work on expertise.

The total sample who lived in Minnesota at the time of the interviews consisted of 50 women and 50 men, 96 Whites and 4 from other ethnic groups. The ethnic distribution reflected the

professional population in Minnesota, but not the United States as a whole. The sample had a mean age of 42.4 years ( $SD=12.4$ ; range, 24–71 years). The participants received graduate training in 34 different universities and 47 different graduate programs within these universities. They had worked in a variety of professional settings throughout the United States. Modal training and practice settings were the University of Minnesota and the Twin Cities area.

In addition to the sample of 100, we also interviewed 20 other practitioners. Some were interviewed at the beginning pilot phase when we were working on the questionnaire. Others were interviewed to help us derive the characteristics of practitioners at the Conventional stage (discussed later in article). For this purpose, we interviewed lay helpers.

### Instrumentation

The research base used to create a 23-item questionnaire was our own written work and research on the topic (e.g., Ronnestad, 1976, 1977, 1983, 1985; Skovholt, 1985), our own work as supervisors and teachers in graduate programs, our own work as practitioners, and the literature on professional development, particularly that on stages of development (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Hogan, 1964), supervision (Grater, 1985; Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982), and occupational burnout (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach, 1982). The questionnaire was refined through a series of pilot interviews. The questions were intended to capture the style and method of the practitioner, as well as the major factors in creating this style and method. We used the aforementioned described research base also to create the eight categories for structuring the flow of data. These are as follows: *Definition of Stage* refers to the experience and education issues. *Central Task* refers to the essential professional focus. *Predominant Affect* refers to the most intense and consistent emotions and attitudes. *Sources of Influence* refers to the most significant developmental sources. *Role and Working Style* refers to the practical manner in which the therapist-counselor works. *Conceptual Ideas Used* refers to predominant theory and research. *Learning Process* refers to the means of acquiring knowledge. *Measures of Effectiveness and Satisfaction* refers to how the individual assesses her or his own competence.

### Procedure

Individual interviews, lasting 1 to 1½ hours, with therapists and counselors served as the first data-gathering method. Here we were guided by Kvale (1983, 1986a, 1986b, 1987), the Norwegian methodologist, and later also by Patton (1990) regarding the use and validity of the interview method of data collection.

The initial interviews were conducted by a research team of the first author and four doctoral students in counseling psychology at the University of Minnesota (two White men, one White woman, and one minority man). Each of the interviewers completed one or more pilot interviews. Each interview was guided by the semistructured, 23-item questionnaire, and was audiotaped. After the 20 interviews in each group were completed, the research team met to discuss the interviews. Using the interview outline as a discussion guide, each debriefing meeting served as an intense cross-case analysis (Patton, 1990). At each debriefing the focus was on capturing essential concepts, subcategories, and categories for the group interviewed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

These included sensitizing concepts and indigenous concepts (Patton, 1990) for the group interviewed. The thematic content was then put into the eight categories developed earlier. After each debriefing meeting, the first author prepared a written description using these eight categories. Members of the interviewing team and informants were asked to read and assess these preliminary descriptions. Each member of the research team and 25% of the participants (5 of 20 in each group) read and reacted to these descriptions. Based on this feedback, the preliminary descriptions were revised.

The Conventional stage was constructed in a manner that differed from the general methodology. Because this stage was designed to measure development before graduate training, the data gathering was unique. For this stage, information from three sources was triangulated. The three sources were insights of the total sample group, a review of the literature on nonprofessional helping, and a small sample ( $N=5$ ) of lay helpers.

As a next step, a doctoral research assistant who was also in the first interviewing group listened to 75 of the 100 interviews. At least half of the interviews in each group were included in this critique. The research assistant listened for congruity between the revised preliminary written descriptions and the content on the tapes. The research assistant also chose quotes that would illuminate theoretical concepts. As a next step, again using modified constant comparative and Grounded Theory Methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the authors met and completely reviewed and revised the manuscript on the basis of the research assistant's critique, as well as by listening to selected interviews.

Next, 60 of the 100 participants (approximately 12 of the 20 in each group) were individually re-interviewed. The interviews lasted 1 to 1½ hours and were conducted by members of a second research group led by the first author, a university staff psychologist (a White woman), and four graduate students in counseling psychology (three White women, 1 White man). Each participant in the second interview responded to the accuracy of one or two of the written stage descriptions and was asked using a short form, "How accurately does this describe you when you were at this stage in terms of education and experience?" After the second interview, the first author met with each research interviewer individually for those interviews that the first author did not conduct.

Throughout this process, the authors often met, listened to tapes, discussed and revised the descriptions. Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggested that as researchers, "You should be asking questions all along the course of your research project" (p. 59). We attempted to be open maximally to the data presented to us, so that we could let concepts, subcategories, and categories emerge or dwindle.

The process of generating the themes started after we had completed the stage model (see Skovholt & Ronnestad, in press). An outline of the stage model is presented in Table 1, with the eight categories of data listed vertically and the eight stages of professional development listed horizontally. First, from a summary of the narrative, we jointly extracted the strongest themes within each of the eight categories. Themes were not extracted unless we jointly agreed that the data provided clear and consistent evidence for such a decision. After this initial extraction, the themes were ordered according to strength of the support in the narrative. Again this decision was based on a joint decision by us as researchers. At this point, some themes were dropped. Last,

the 20 remaining themes were arranged within the following categories: Primary Characteristic Themes, Process Descriptor Themes, Source of Influence Themes, and Secondary Characteristic Themes. In line with the strength of qualitative research, we believe that the themes, described in the next section, best serve as hypotheses to be proven or disproven by more precise empirical studies.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Primary Characteristic Themes

**Theme 1: Professional development is growth toward professional individuation.** The individuation process involves an increasingly higher order integration of the professional self and the personal self. This integration includes a strong consistency between ideology—one's values and theoretical stance—and methods and techniques used by the individual. It includes a movement from an unarticulated, preconceptual, and ideological way of functioning to a mode of functioning that is founded on the individual's own integrated, experience-based generalizations or what we call "accumulated wisdom." Individuation is an expression of deeper and deeper layers of the self.

As a theoretical concept, this definition of individuation consists of two elements—a self-other differentiated component and a relational component. This is analogous to the work of Grotevant and Cooper (1986) on the individuation of youth in the family context. Their definition includes both the "... qualities of individuality and connectedness" (p. 89). Unlike some conceptualizations that equate the concept of individuation with separation and autonomy (Lawler, 1990), we have been struck by how the individuation process for our participants was saturated with relationships. This relationship saturated individuation process seems to be parallel with the self-in-relation theory of Jordan and Surray (cited in Lerner, 1988, p. 243). Clients, peers, professional elders, family, friends, and individuals being supervised were all significant. This is consistent with other counselor development work (Skovholt & McCarthy, 1988) and other theoretical conceptualizations (Karpel, 1976; Stierlin, Rucker-Emden, Wetzel, & Wirsching, 1984). This individuation idea is also analogous to the work of Loganbill et al. (1982) on professional identity development.

Ideally, the long-term result of the professional individuation process is an optimal therapeutic self that consists of a unique personal blend of the developed professional and personal selves. Within an ethical and competent context, the individual freely chooses the framework and form of professional functioning.

**Theme 2: An external and rigidity orientation in role, working style, and conceptualizing issues increases throughout training, then declines continuously.** There seem to be three distinct periods of the professional individuation process.

*Pretraining: The conventional mode.* The first period occurs before professional training. During this period, the individual operates as a helper of others according to the known and natural rules that govern the individual's behavior in personal relationships. The professional realm (as a helper of others) and personal realm are similar regarding the individual's functioning.

*Training: The external and rigid mode.* The second phase begins with the start of professional training. From this point to the end of training, a gulf widens between professional and personal functioning. Professional functioning is more and more externally driven with the individual increasingly suppressing characteristic personal methods of functioning (e.g., posture, concep-

**TABLE 1**  
**Outline of Stage Model**

Categories	Stages			
	Conventional	Transition to Professional Training	Imitation of Experts	Conditional Autonomy
Definition and time period	Untrained, may be many years	First year of graduate school	Middle years of graduate school	Internship, 6 months to 2 years
Central task	Use what one naturally knows	Assimilate information from many sources and apply it in practice	Maintain openness at the meta level while imitating experts at the practical level	Function as a professional
Predominant affect	Sympathy	Enthusiasm and insecurity	Bewilderment then later calm and temporary security	Variable confidence
Predominant sources of influence	One's own personal life	Sense of being overwhelmed because of many interacting new and old data bases	Multiple including supervisors, clients, theory/research, peers, personal life, social-cultural environment	Multiple including supervisors, clients, theory/research, peers, personal life, social-cultural environment
Role and working style	Sympathetic friend	Uncertain/shifting while struggling to fit practice with theory	Uncertain while developing a rigid mastery of basics	Increased rigidity in professional role and working style
Conceptual ideas	Common sense	Urgency in learning conceptual ideas and techniques	Intense searching for conceptual ideas and techniques	Refined mastery of conceptual ideas and techniques
Learning process	Experiential	Cognitive processing and introspection	Imitation, introspection, and cognitive processing	Continual imitation with alterations, introspection, cognitive processing
Measures of effectiveness and satisfaction	Usually assumed, often not of concern	Visible client improvement and supervisor reaction	Client feedback and supervisor reactions	More complex view of client feedback and supervisor reactions

tualization of human behavior) for externally imposed, professionally appropriate modes of functioning. For example, a Transition to Professional Training female participant said, "At times I was so busy thinking about the instructions given in class and textbooks, I barely heard the client." This behavior can be described as increasing externally oriented rigidity. One's natural use of humor often follows this gradient. It usually becomes less present during training only to gradually return at a later point.

As a function of external regulation in graduate school, mostly in the form of difficult examinations, intense professional socialization, structured internships, and licensing requirements, the individual goes through a long period of learning and demonstrating expertise in meeting the approval of the profession's gatekeepers: professors, supervisors, and licensing board members. This is an exhaustive process that commands much of the individual's life energy. Perfectionistic behavior, obsessiveness, and preoccupation characterize many who successfully run this gauntlet. In fact, it is these traits that often enable the individual to be accepted by graduate programs at the beginning of this second phase.

A direct result of this enormous professional pressure is the development of externally imposed rigidity in many areas of professional functioning, such as role or working style, conceptualization of issues, and measurement of success. (See Lamb,

Baker, Jennings, and Yarris [1982] for a description of developmental issues during the internship.)

*Post-training: The loosening and internal mode.* Graduation and licensure provide a release from this externally imposed rigidity. Although the individual while in training may be hostile toward professional gatekeepers, the dreamed release is not always easy. Something desired so much now can be experienced as professional loneliness in a way not experienced before. The demand—to decide which elements of the professionally imposed rigidity to shed and which elements of the internal self to express—is often experienced as painful. A female participant reflected back and said, "Having less guidance from professors and supervisors was scary." A male participant reflected back and said, "People weren't protecting you from taking on too much anymore."

The third period often begins with a sense of confirmation regarding one's expertise in second phase functioning. The individual wants to feel very positive about one's skills after finishing the training program. In time, however, a period of disquiet often occurs because the externally imposed rigidity seems to be evaporating as the individual is told in subtle ways to begin functioning from a self, as opposed to other, direction base. This realization can produce a dis-ease and period of crisis.

The professional individuation process at this third phase occurs over a period of 20 to 30 years. Increased authenticity is a major thrust for the individual during this third phase. The push

TABLE 1 (continued)

Stages (continued)			
Exploration	Integration	Individuation	Integrity
New graduate, 2–5 years	2–5 years	10–30 years	1–10 years
Explore beyond the known	Developing authenticity	Deeper authenticity	Being oneself and preparing for retirement
Confidence and anxiety	Satisfaction and hope	Satisfaction and distress	Acceptance
New data bases, i.e. new work setting, self now as professional, multiple other sources	Self as professional elder as new influence, multiple other sources	Experience-based generalizations and accumulated wisdom are becoming primary. Earlier sources of influence are internalized, self as professional elder	Experience-based generalizations and accumulated wisdom are primary. Earlier sources of influence are internalized, self as professional elder
Modifying externally imposed professional style	Role and working style as mix of externally imposed rigidity and internally imposed loosening mode	Increasingly oneself within competent professional boundaries	Being oneself
Personal rejection of some earlier mastered conceptual ideas	An emerging personally selected synergistic and eclectic form	Individualized and personalized	Highly individually chosen and integrated
Reflection	Personally chosen methods	Personally chosen methods	Personally chosen methods
Increasingly realistic and internalized criteria	Increasingly realistic and continued internalization of criteria	Realistic and internal	Profoundly internal and realistic

for authenticity may cost the individual because of a need to give up much that has been learned earlier—for example, a conceptual system that was learned thoroughly in graduate school but that no longer is acceptable because of the internalized need for authenticity. An individuation stage participant said, “I learned all the ‘rules’ and so I came to a point—after lots of effort—where I knew the ‘rules’ very well. Gradually I modified the ‘rules.’ Then I began to use the ‘rules’ to let me go where I wanted to go. Lately I haven’t been talking so much in terms of ‘rules.’”

**Theme 3: As the professional matures, continuous professional reflection constitutes the central developmental process.** Professional development leads to professional individuation by the essential method of continuous professional reflection. This is the major method of professional development across all stages. There are three necessary parts of continuous professional reflection: Intense professional and personal experience, connections to other searchers through an open and supportive work environment, and a reflective stance.

**Intense professional and personal experience.** The process of continuous professional reflection demands an ongoing flow of professional interaction. Some of these interpersonal experiences are professional and occur through interaction with clients, supervisors, professors, therapists, and peers. Others are in the personal and private domain and consist of one’s relationship to children, parents, spouse, and friends. The senior research participants

pointed to these intense interpersonal experiences as essential in their development.

**Open, supportive work environment.** It is important to have an environment supportive of one’s search, an environment where the person is connected to other professional searchers. Such an environment values high standards of performance and a searching process as opposed to the process of total acceptance of a preordained set of ideological principles. Such an environment values diversity and has an “opening up” stance as opposed to a simplification of the complex world. For example, in working with a client case, such an environment will encourage looking for as many associations on a case as possible rather than reinforcing only a narrow, prescriptive theory.

**Reflective stance.** Paramount in this process is a reflective stance, which means that the individual is consciously giving time and energy to processing, alone and with others, significant experiences. An active, exploratory, searching, and open attitude is of extreme importance. Asking for and receiving feedback is crucial.

In the early years, when the individual is involved in highly structured professional training, it is important to be able to resist defining self only through the view of others. Later, when the individual is beyond the structure of external control and supervision in graduate school, it is crucial for the individual to seek out stimulations and feedback on a continual basis. Stagnation

and deterioration can occur for the senior professional who neglects setting up channels for stimulation or feedback or has only confirmatory feedback channels.

**Theme 4: Beginning practitioners rely on external expertise; senior practitioners rely on internal expertise.** In time, experience-based generalizations and accumulated wisdom replace the use of experts' context-free theory and one's own unarticulated, preconceptual ideology as a basis of professional functioning. The demand for external expertise early in development is reflected in these comments by Martin, Slemon, Hiebert, Hallberg, and Cummings (1989): "As counselor educators, we are constantly being pressured by students to tell them what to 'do' with a particular client" (p. 133). Reflecting back on her training years, one of the participants described the positive feedback from a supervisor and said, "I can still remember how needed that was."

This theme is compatible with the work of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986). Our concept of accumulated wisdom is also similar to the description of expertise by Glaser and Chi (1988) as entailing a "... rich structure of domain specific knowledge" (p. xxi). Simon (cited in Benderly, 1989) described a related knowledge and experience-based expertise as producing intuition. As a conclusion of their research contrasting experts and novices, Cummings, Hallberg, Martin, Slemon, and Hiebert (1990) stated, "... it seems that a combination of experience and training provides counselors with a parsimonious set of deep-level schemata that can be activated consistently to assess in conceptualizing individual clients" (p. 132). Kivlighan and Quigley (1991) described a similar dimension in group work.

As a prerequisite to operating from accumulated wisdom, which is built from experience-based generalizations, the individual must engage in highly disciplined and intensive study of the core body of knowledge in the field. From this theory-research base, hundreds of hours of experiences produce useful generalizations, which then produce accumulated wisdom. Although theoretically not identical, the use of what Benner (1982) labeled "past concrete experiences," Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) labeled "aspect recognition" and "maxims" (maxims provide direction about what is important to take into consideration), and we label "experience-based generalizations" and "accumulated wisdom" illustrates how the senior expert therapist-counselor is able to recognize critical data amidst the complexity of the client's presenting information.

**Theme 5: Conceptual system and role, and working style become increasingly congruent with one's personality and cognitive schema.** In time the individual gradually sheds elements of the professional role that are incongruent with the self. The need for compatibility with the self seems more powerful in choice of professional role, over the many years that professional individuation occurs, than does the empirical research base or the professional biases of one's graduate training program (Guy, 1987).

Conceptual system, we concluded, always seemed compatible with the personality and cognitive schema of our senior participants. Many of them reported displacing a theoretical approach mastered earlier because it just was not compatible with oneself. Compatibility often was related to whether the emphasis of the approach (e.g., affect, behavior, cognition) matched the personality and cognitive schema of the therapist-counselor.

Role and working style also seemed to be very compatible

with the senior participant as a person. Some individuals were formal, others informal, some very dominant and verbal, others egalitarian and quiet. The authenticity-to-self requirement seemed to have been met by these senior participants. Wachowiak, Bauer, and Simono (1979) described the movement of counseling center psychologists into a variety of work settings within 10 years after receiving the doctorate. Perhaps some of this movement correlates with the current compatibility theme.

**Theme 6: There is movement from received knowledge toward constructed knowledge.** The internal expertise of the senior practitioner is guided by an individualized learning method and active knowledge development. With experience, learning method takes a more heterogeneous form across individuals. Freed from the rigid learning processes used uniformly in formal schooling, the individual is increasingly able to choose how to continue the learning process. Experienced participants in our sample varied in preference among such forms as relying on a trusted mentor, using peer group supervision, studying the psychological themes in movies, reading the empirical research, attending workshops, keeping an elaborate journal, or reading in areas such as biography, anthropology, and poetry.

Expertise is created differently as the practitioner matures. Starting from the Perry (1981) model of cognitive meaning and development, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) created seven levels of the ways of knowing. This model seems useful to us as a way of charting the changes in knowledge development for therapists and counselors of both genders. They described an early level, received knowledge, as follows:

While received knowers can be very open to take in what others have to offer, they have little confidence in their own ability to speak. Believing that truth comes from others, they still their own voices to hear the voices of others. (p. 37)

This seems to us descriptive of the knowledge generation method of the new graduate student in a therapist-counselor training program.

The senior practitioner operates at a very different knowledge generation level. The highest level of the Belenky et al. (1986) model is constructed knowledge:

All knowledge is constructed, and the knower is an intimate part of the known. (p. 137)

To see that all knowledge is a construction and that truth is a matter of the context in which it is embedded is to greatly expand the possibilities of how to think about anything. (p. 138)

Theories become not truth but models for approximate experience. (p. 138)

The movement through the different levels of knowledge construction along with the increasingly idiosyncratic nature of one's learning style produces profound changes from the professional life of the novice to the professional life of the elder. For example, in the rich context of a professional conference, new graduate students operating from a position of received knowledge would passively accept the speaker's ideas as accurate and truthful, something to be followed. At the constructed knowledge position, the speaker's ideas would be considered as constructions of the speaker to be rejected or incorporated as part of a much more active knowledge development style. This occurs

because the senior practitioner as part of her or his development has a much more elaborate set of personally developed theoretical constructs to balance against the speaker's ideas.

### Process Descriptor Themes

**Theme 7: Development is influenced by multiple sources that are experienced in both common and unique ways.** During the research process, we kept discovering more and more elements that affect development. These elements are the following: professional elders (supervisors, professors, mentors, therapists, experts), peers and colleagues, clients, theories and research, one's own personal life, the social and cultural environment on the micro level (within the therapy and counseling occupational world) and macro level (the larger society and culture), and becoming a professional elder on one's own. The sources of influence are common because they affect every individual. Yet timing, intensity, and pace dimensions as well as many unique features (i.e., the theoretical approach of a supervisor) produce an incredible uniqueness for the sources of influence.

**Theme 8: Optimal professional development is a long, slow, and erratic process.** The use of continuous professional reflection goes on year after year as the professional base is built, expanded, and individualized. This difficult process occurs for each person as he or she attempts to improve professional functioning. This normalization of the struggle and the slowness of the development of professional expertise are especially important for the new therapist-counselor to understand. Studying expertise, Glaser (cited in Benderly, 1989) said that learning knowledge-rich tasks such as medical diagnosis, and presumably therapy and counseling work, takes "hundreds and thousands of hours of earning and experience" (p. 36).

Over the long-term career, the individual developmental process varies greatly. At times the developmental process is continuous. At times it is more of an intense change process, perhaps highlighted by a specific critical incident, followed by a period of slow change. Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987) described this process using the Piagetian concepts of assimilation followed by accommodation. At times the process follows a recycling loop in which themes are repeated at increasingly deeper levels. The concept of recycling is compatible with Hess (1987) and Loganbill et al. (1982). For example, a theme such as lack of confidence in one's ability may be predominant in the first year of graduate school, then may reemerge 5 years later, and then again 20 years later.

In the stage model (Table 1; Skovholt & Ronnestad, in press) the time period can vary greatly across stages and across individuals. It is difficult to be specific about the pace because of the impact of so many factors. One factor, however—age when entering graduate school—seems to have a major impact on development. In our sample, older graduate students seemed to go through the early stages more quickly than did younger graduate students. Reading a draft description of the younger student with little experience, a 40-year-old female participant said:

I don't fit all parts of this stage description—perhaps part of this is a function of being older and already having had two careers which have been rewarding and engrossing for me: teacher and mother. From these I have brought the knowledge that I could work effectively with people, that I could not solve their problems for them without at least equal effort on their

part. I think I also have the notion that in any field there are many theories and that I can comfortably pick and choose and combine elements from any or all of them as they seem appropriate and helpful for me. I have also done extensive reading on the subject. I think this has served to cushion me from many things you describe.

Other factors that often correlate with age—experience in the human services confronting intense personal stress, recovering from a dysfunctional family of origin, and being involved with a cause to promote human development—also seem to increase the pace through the early stages. The difference in pace based on factors such as age at the beginning of graduate school, however, seems to fade with time.

**Theme 9: Post-training years are critical for optimal development.** Most developmental models within the therapy and counseling field are in fact models of student development. For example, there is a wealth of supervision-oriented studies that consider changes between beginning practicum students and interns on one or more dimensions. Nevertheless, "... little is known about the postgraduate counselor . . . Such studies are necessary for a complete understanding of counselor development across the professional life span" (Borders, 1989, p. 21). Hogan's (1964) often-cited work is an example of an incomplete stage model. After three graduate student stages, one enters the fourth stage, master psychologist, which covers all the years from graduation to retirement. We are reminded of the Freudian psychosexual stages with the last stage—Genital—covering everything from adolescence to senior adulthood.

Senior participants in our sample helped us understand that therapist-counselor development continues and evolves long after school and that a focus on trainee changes without the larger vision can easily lead to erroneous conclusions and implications. For example, we understood the profound reduction in pervasive anxiety from the transition to professional training stage to the integrity stage only after interviews with senior practitioners. They freely described this major shift in their lives. The beginning participants, perhaps because of minimization and the lack of a contrast effect, were not able to help us understand this dimension.

Even within the postgraduate years, a period of decades, there are major shifts in many dimensions. For example, there is the increased involvement of oneself as a professional elder, which serves as a personal source of influence; there is an increased shedding of inauthentic elements of the self during the increased internal orientation of the postgraduate years; there is increased use of experience-based generalizations and accumulated wisdom to guide practitioners. In fact, it may be that the critical factor in professional development and the avoidance of stagnation and pseudodevelopment (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 1991; Skovholt & Ronnestad, in press) is the shift from the external focus of pleasing professional gatekeepers to an internal focus, which involves the forming of one's own unique professional self. This occurs long after formal training is completed.

**Theme 10: As the professional develops, there is a decline of pervasive anxiety.** The professional individuation and accumulated wisdom processes are essential in the replacement of pervasive anxiety with quiet comfort and confidence. The anxiety of the beginner has been discussed by many authors ever since Robinson's article in 1936 (cited in Gysbers & Ronnestad, 1974). Others who discuss the anxiety of the beginner include Dodge (1982), Grater (1985), Loganbill et al. (1982), and Stoltenberg and



Delworth (1987). In the current formulation, a crucial factor in the decline of pervasive anxiety is the increase in expertise, which results from long periods of experience and training.

The increased use of internal expertise by way of experience-based generalizations and accumulated wisdom is a key element. Using different terminology, Martin et al. (1989) gave support to this idea:

... experience as counselors gradually equips seasoned practitioners with efficient sets of schemata that they consistently draw on when conceptualizing individual clients and their problems. These schemata probably have tremendous practical advantages in both economy of time and energy and *felt confidence* [italics added] for the veteran counselor. (p. 399)

The level of pervasive anxiety has a dramatic effect on the practitioner, and because the anxiety level is so different from novice to senior practitioner, the professional functioning of the individual also differs dramatically in many ways—for example, needing or not needing direct positive feedback from a client, learning to tolerate ambiguity for a long period of time while working with a client, and discovering how to separate self from a client's self. As one greatly respected senior female participant said, "In time, you are no longer afraid of your clients." This contrasts with two female intern-level informants who described their anxiety: "I have gone from being petrified to being comfortable" and "I'm less afraid of losing patients than in the past." Pervasive anxiety also increases and decreases in recycling loops. Confidence can be lost for a time during periods of career transition or unusual stress related to work with clients.

#### Source of Influence Themes

**Theme 11: Interpersonal encounters are more influential than are impersonal data.** Intense interpersonal experiences strongly influence professional development. When asking participants about the impact of theories and research, we thought that theory and research would be perceived as of central importance for their development. In the interviews, however, the participants talked most about the impact of people and least about empirical research results.

In the work context, the following people were significant for our participants: clients, peers and colleagues, and a group of professional elders (supervisors, professors, one's own therapist-counselor, experts, and mentors). For the participants as a group, clients were considered as most significant, followed by professional elders. In time, being a professional elder was also very significant for the individual. Of course, there is great variety across individuals in their ranking of the impact by particular persons. Theory and research is often mediated through these individuals, and in this way, both people and knowledge are of importance.

**Theme 12: Personal life strongly influences professional functioning.** It is a difficult and elusive task to integrate fully concerns from the therapist-counselor's personal life into professional practice in a way that is most beneficial to clients and authentic to the individual. The concerns often relate to pain involving family of origin, definition of self, or other fundamental issues. Guy (1987) has elaborated on this theme.

Often these concerns are out of personal awareness at the time of graduate school admission. The graduate school participants in the sample most often claimed to understand their motivation

for entering therapy and counseling work. Senior participants, on the contrary, often said they did not fully understand their occupational motives when a novice. Later, the motivational concerns may be expressed in the choice of topic for the master's or doctoral thesis or the choice of work setting. In time, the individual is able to gain perspective on these personal concerns and realize how the themes produce energy for therapeutic and counseling work and give the individual the double edge of unusual insight and blind spots.

Both difficult and normative life experiences continually affect the professional. Individuals in our sample repeatedly talked about the value they derived from their own distress and loss experiences such as divorce, death, disability, loss of property, and loss of meaning and purpose. An integration-stage woman said, "I've lived through a lot of hell and a lot of pleasure; I've lived a long time and that can be useful if you use it well." Painful experiences seem to be more instructive than are success and achievement experiences. They produce reflection and insight and provide an experiential base that fosters an empathic understanding of clients.

Normative experiences include events such as being a parent, working for a variety of bosses, balancing roles in life, experiencing one's parents' aging, being uprooted by a geographic move, going through culture shock, or coping with performance failure. Participants reported that the personal experiences were immensely rich, informative, and motivational for the work of therapy and counseling.

**Theme 13: Clients are a continuous major source of influence and serve as primary teachers.** At all levels of experience and education, our sample reported that clients have a powerful impact on their professional functioning. Through the close interpersonal contact between the client and therapist-counselor, the latter is continually receiving feedback on himself or herself as a person. Clients continually provide specific feedback regarding the practitioner's interventions.

A common crisis for a professional involves a lack of client improvement when the practitioner uses a theoretical approach that the practitioner had worked hard to master because of its supposed effectiveness. This often brings on a searching process for the practitioner regarding the cause of the failure. The quality of this search affects whether stagnation or development is likely to occur (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 1991; Skovholt & Ronnestad, in press).

**Theme 14: Newer members of the field view professional elders and graduate training with strong affective reactions.**

Professional elders are of extreme importance to newer members of the profession and tend to be idealized or devalued. The beginner wants to learn from, model, please, and respect such individuals. Strong admiration is expressed for senior members of the profession, although negative reactions are just as common. Beyond graduate school, professional elders are idealized and devalued less and their humanness—ordinariness, strengths and weaknesses, uniqueness—is better understood and accepted.

Most therapists and counselors experience some disillusionment regarding their graduate education and training. The key issue is the gulf between expectations of the program, the institution, the faculty, and actual reality. The higher the expectations before training begins, the greater the eventual, though not immediate, disillusionment and its corollaries, disappointment and



anger. A major issue is the powerless student role combined with the constant pressure to meet graduate program requirements. After meeting the expectations of professors, the student usually still feels underprepared by the graduate program, particularly at the beginning of practicum and at graduation. Specific disillusionment issues vary considerably but include academic requirements that seem useless and the lack of training in areas that the student views as important.

**Theme 15: External support is most important at the beginning of one's career and at transition points.** For most professionals, there occurs a movement from wanting continual external support as a beginner to internalizing support as an advanced professional. At the beginning of graduate school, external support is often sought from one's professors, adviser, and peers. During practicum and internship, the request for external support is often directed to one's supervisor and peers. At the beginning of a new professional position, work supervisor, mentor, and peer support is often desired. At career transitional points and at especially stressful times, support of these people is also desired. In the senior years of one's career, external support is often derived through peer relationships and the supervision relationship with younger professionals.

**Theme 16: Professional isolation becomes an important issue with increased experience and age.** As time goes on, professional elders gradually disappear through retirement and death, and the individual is left with a diminished number of professors, supervisors, therapists, mentors, or experts to lean on, emulate, and learn from.

In an internalized sense, professional elders may continue to be present. One member of our sample often says to himself, "Now how would Ron respond to this?" Ron was his supervisor 20 years ago in a different part of the country. Another had a place in the office where a picture of Freud could be seen.

Senior practitioners often experience the loss of their own peer group. Compared to the often intense and continual interaction with numerous classmates in graduate school, many individuals 20 years later are much more isolated professionally. For example, senior practitioners often gravitate to private practice, a setting where there is often less interaction with colleagues.

**Theme 17: Modeling/imitation is a powerful and preferred early—but not later—learning method.** In the first years of professional training, the individual is eager to absorb by watching experts work and hearing them talk about their work. This use of models has a long history in the supervision literature (Ronnestad, 1977). Experts are defined as writers of major theoretical approaches or techniques for certain problem areas, respected local practitioners, or respected professors or supervisors. One male participant looking back on the early years said, "I had an existential/humanistic teacher and so for a while I became an existential humanist and then I had a behaviorist and so I became a behaviorist and then I had a person whose orientation was sex therapy and sexual issues and so for a while that became paramount . . ." Early in training, the process of learning occurs efficiently through mechanical, repetitive imitation. Said a male student participant, "I wanted to absorb from counselors I observed." Therefore, the search for experts to imitate takes on great salience early in one's professional development. Sometimes trainees are frustrated by the inability to watch live models. Said one female participant, "I wanted more opportunities to watch experienced practitioners at work." The strong demand

for the "Gloria" films (Shostrom, 1965) and the growth of this series to nine modeling films, shown predominantly to audiences of students in training, support this finding.

Experienced practitioners have internalized their education and have moved beyond the continuum of rote imitation to selective identification. Experienced practitioners are most focused on expanding, clarifying, and elaborating their own style and, therefore, find limited value in watching other experts work.

### Secondary Characteristic Themes

**Theme 18: There is a movement toward increased boundary clarity and responsibility differentiation.** At the beginning of professional development, the therapist-counselor typically assumes total responsibility for client improvement and uses directly expressed client satisfaction as the predominant criterion to judge success. After extensive experience, the individual had an increased ability to regulate (precisely) professional involvement within and across three domains of the self: the private self, the personal self, and the professional self. In other words, the art of self-disclosure is practiced with more expertise by the experienced practitioner. This gradual shift is captured in the words of a female participant who said, "Intellectually, I know that I am not totally responsible, but emotionally I feel it is up to me to make the client's life better." There is also an increased ability to use physical, mental, and emotional boundaries within these three domains.

For example, with time, one is more able to regulate, in a productive way, the emotional involvement that is given to clients outside of sessions. By midcareer, there is a noticeable shift in the protection of self. There is also increased ability to regulate professional roles in one's personal life. The use of therapy and counseling knowledge by the beginner (i.e., a novice female participant said, "What I am learning is helpful, much to the chagrin of my family.") is usually modulated in the life of the senior practitioner. By this time, protection of self is a high priority activity and is expressed by behavior such as strict time limits for work and increased willingness to refer clients. The development of these boundaries is a critical skill and allows the individual to be involved but not depleted by the multiple accounts of human suffering that are heard by the average practitioner.

**Theme 19: For the practitioner there is a realignment from a narcissistic position to a therapeutic position.** With time and the variety of experiences with clients that at times produce only limited success, the therapist-counselor must develop a posture of realism to replace a previous, articulated or unarticulated, position of idealism. Idealism must be saturated with a reality-based optimism to prevent the burnout elements of discouragement from emerging.

An important component of the change from idealism to realism for the practitioner is a movement from a narcissistic position to a therapeutic position. The narcissistic position often involves a partially understood attraction to the therapist-counselor role because of an assumption that the role is powerful: One has power to help people, cure, and lessen dis-ease and anxiety; therefore, acting as a practitioner and helping others can increase one's own self-esteem and competence. For a discussion of motivation to become a therapist-counselor, see Guy (1987).

The therapeutic position involves less performance anxiety and a less grandiose sense of self as a curative agent. The shift

involves a realignment from a position of practitioner power to client power. Giving up this controlling stance, which is rooted in the professional's desire to feel powerful while experiencing a lack of professional confidence, paradoxically allows the therapist-counselor to be more effective. The shift is reflected in the belief of the beginner that he or she must measure every word because the wrong word can be very destructive. The long-term veteran reacts differently in part because of the realization that he or she is not that powerful. Also, there is a shift from assessing effectiveness by use of client, supervisor, and peer evaluations to more internalized, professionally based criteria.

A factor that helps this process is the "series of humiliations," that happen to practitioners over time. These occur when the best work of the practitioner does not produce desired client outcomes. An important part of this shift is the clarity that comes in time that enables the individual to accurately distinguish between normative failure and excessive failure. The beginner most often believes that he or she is responsible for any and all failures that occur in work with clients.

**Theme 20: Extensive experience with suffering produces heightened tolerance and acceptance of human variability.** Through direct work with people who are suffering, the counselor develops greater understanding of the human variability in deciding, coping, and resolving both difficult and simple issues. Equally important, the personal life of the therapist-counselor is instructive. Through the process of living one's life as an adult, a variety of experiences, including personal disappointments and choices, help to make the individual become less judgmental of others.

### LIMITATIONS

The findings of this research must be considered in light of their limitations. First, in studying development, cross-sectional designs introduce the possibility of cohort differences confounding stage differences. Most criticisms of cross-sectional designs, however, have occurred within the framework of quantitative methods (e.g., Ellis, 1991). The methodology used in this study was qualitative and contained two elements that made it a modified cross-sectional design: (a) 60 of the participants were reinterviewed 2 years after the first interview and (b) participants provided information regarding their own development at earlier education and experience levels. Despite these qualifications, a longitudinal study over 30 years would have been advantageous as compared with the current design. Second, the sample is limited in its diversity, and this reduces the usefulness of the results. In addition, most graduate student participants were selected from only one source, the University of Minnesota, introducing a possible training bias. Third, the qualitative nature of this study makes it impossible to determine causal relationships that perhaps could have emerged in a statistical analysis.

### CONCLUSION

Little has been written on the structure of normative practitioner development over the span of an average career. The current research, as a qualitative study, may best serve as a source of many hypotheses to be proven or disproven by more precise empirical methods. The themes presented here suggest that development involves a movement from reliance on external authority to reliance on internal authority and that this process

occurs through the individual's interaction with multiple sources of influence over a long period of time. Although development during graduate school has been most extensively studied, sources of influence occur with equal or greater power long after formal training is complete. In fact, it may be that a central element that distinguishes development from stagnation or impairment is the presence or absence of the practitioner's own ongoing internalized developmental processes.

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*Thomas M. Skovholt is a professor of counseling and student personnel psychology in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Minnesota–Minneapolis. Michael Helge Rønnestad is an associate professor of clinical psychology in the Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway. Appreciation is expressed to Carla Hill for her assistance with this research project. Acknowledgment is also made of the contributions of those who, along with the first author, conducted the research interviews. They were Bill Cuff, Janet Schank, Md. Razzarque, Kevin Harrington, Elizabeth Horst, Patti Neiman, Kay Thomas, and Charles Boudreaux. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Thomas M. Skovholt, Department of Educational Psychology, 129 Burton Hall, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455.*