Counselors' collective self-esteem mediates job dissatisfaction and client relationships

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Sang-Hee Lee
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Given the central role of professional identity (i.e., collective self-esteem in this study), the authors examined whether collective self-esteem mediated or moderated relations between job dissatisfaction and client relationships in a sample of 132 professional counselors in the United States. Results indicated that collective self-esteem partially mediated the relationship between job dissatisfaction and client relationships. Furthermore, job dissatisfaction was negatively related to greater levels of private collective self-esteem, and greater private collective self-esteem was positively related to better client relationships.

Professional counselors experience stressors related to their profession because of both the nature of the work and the role expectations of the profession (Evans & Villavisinis, 1997). The complexity and severity of client needs have increased as American society has become more diverse (Osborn, 2004). In this situation, professional counselors may view themselves negatively or positively in the profession because their perceptions of self as responsive counselors vary with clients’ needs. According to Butler and Constantine (2005), counselors' perceptions of themselves as members of the counseling profession (i.e., their collective self-esteem) can affect their competence as counselors and their client–counselor relationships. Collective self-esteem, or collective identity, refers to individuals’ evaluations of and identifications with the social group (e.g., the counseling profession) to which they belong (Katz, Swindell, & Farrow, 2004). That is, counselors' collective self-esteem relates to how counselors identify themselves in the counseling profession (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994). Note that solely obtaining or maintaining a professional position may not promote the counselor’s sense of collective identity (Gale & Austin, 2003).
Professional counselors lack a sense of specific identity for two reasons: (a) professional
counselors receive their training from different accrediting bodies (Gale & Austin, 2003)
and (b) counselors are affiliated with multiple professional organizations that may hold
opposing positions. Thus, different training experiences, specializations, credential-
ing, and professional affiliations can be a challenge to professional counselors in
the effort to promote their sense of collective identity. Advancing their collective
identity helps counselors establish their unique roles. Therefore, identifying professional
counselors’ sense of collective identity within their profession is essential because this
collective identity directly relates to their attitudes toward their jobs and the services
offered to clients or students (Brott & Myers, 1999). Furthermore, job environment and job
satisfaction relate to counselors’ views of the counseling profession. For example, many
helping professionals such as social workers or counselors perceive that they spend too
much time on paperwork rather than with clients. Thus, they could be dissatisfied with
their jobs as counselors, with this dissatisfaction contributing to their perceptions about
their profession and their client relationships (“Drowning in Paperwork,” 2005).

Professional counselors need to provide constant empathy and one-way caring
to clients experiencing emotional trauma (Osborn, 2004). Counselors’ jobs and job
responsibilities can affect their role perceptions, especially role ambiguity and role
diffusion or confusion about the individual’s unique contribution to the counseling
profession as a whole (Osborn, 2004). Dixon Rayle (2006a) stressed that counselors’
perceptions of themselves as being considered important in making differences mediate
job-related stress and job satisfaction. Overall, how one identifies oneself in the
counseling profession remains an important factor in understanding job satisfaction
is associated with job satisfaction.

Savicki and Cooley (1987) emphasized that organizational stressors (e.g., difficult re-
relationships with staff) are related to detached or distant feelings from clients (Wilkerson
& Bellini, 2006). More specifically, role ambiguity, incongruity, conflict, and professional
identity are associated with school counselors’ depersonalization of their students (Butler
& Constantine, 2005). Lee et al. (2007) reported that job dissatisfaction is one of the
factors affecting counselors’ client relationships. Considering the relationships among
job satisfaction, collective identity, and client relationships, collective identity affects the
interplay of job satisfaction and counselors’ client relationships. Therefore, we designed
this study to clarify the relationships between job dissatisfaction, collective self-esteem,
and counselors’ client relationships by investigating whether the collective self-esteem
mediated or moderated (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Skowron, Wester, & Azen, 2004) the
negative relationship between job dissatisfaction and client relationships.

According to Baron and Kenny (1986), the mediator (i.e., collective self-esteem
in this study) may function as a third variable, which “represents the generative
mechanism through which the focal independent variable [job dissatisfaction in this
study] is able to influence the dependent variable of interest [client relationships
in this study]” (p. 1173). We decided to conceptualize collective self-esteem as a
mediating variable indicating that counselors’ professional identity may mediate
between job dissatisfaction and client relationships. That is, the influence of job
dissatisfaction experiences on client relationships may manifest itself through the counselors’ levels of collective self-esteem.

Alternatively, we also posit that collective self-esteem may function as a moderator between job dissatisfaction and client relationships. The moderator (i.e., collective self-esteem in this study) functions as the third variable, which “partitions a focal independent variable [job dissatisfaction in this study] into subgroups that establish its domains of maximal effectiveness in regard to a given dependent variable [client relationships in this study]” (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p. 1173). The test for moderation in this study involved evaluating the interactions between the independent variable (job dissatisfaction) and four types of collective self-esteem. For example, the moderation hypothesis would hold if, under conditions of low job dissatisfaction, no differences between high and low levels of collective self-esteem were found on the outcome variable of client relationships. Conversely, at higher job dissatisfaction levels, counselors with high-level collective self-esteem would report better client relationships than would those with low-level collective self-esteem.

To examine how collective self-esteem and client relationships relate to job dissatisfaction as perceived by professional counselors, we specifically tested whether the components of collective self-esteem would mediate the relationship between job dissatisfaction and client relationships among professional counselors. Additionally, we tested a competing hypothesis that collective self-esteem would moderate the relationship between job dissatisfaction and client relationships among professional counselors. Namely, collective self-esteem would have a moderating effect if its interaction with the predictor (job dissatisfaction) significantly were to account for the criterion variable (client relationships).

**METHOD**

**Participants**

The participants were 132 professional counselors from the southern region of the United States. The majority of the counselors were women (83.3% women and 16.7% men). Within the sample, 94.7% were White, 3.0% African American, and 1.5% Hispanic; 0.8% indicated that they belonged to more than one group. The sample included counselors with a wide range of specialties. Among the participants, 43.2% were school counselors, 25.3% mental health counselors, 9.0% family counselors, 7.6% college counselors, 4.1% rehabilitation counselors, and 1.5% career counselors; 9.3% indicated that they fit into more than one category. The counselors ranged in age from 25 to 68 years ($M = 46.20, SD = 11.37$), in counseling experience from 1 year to 33 years ($M = 11.31, SD = 8.37$), and in total annual income from $15,000 to $75,000.

**Measures**

*Collective Self-Esteem Scale (CSES).* The CSES (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) is a 16-item instrument, using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 =
strongly agree), that measures self-esteem as it relates to belonging to a specific social group. The CSES is composed of four subscales measuring different dimensions of collective self-esteem. The first subscale, Membership Collective Self-Esteem, assesses people’s judgments of how worthy they are as members of their social groups (e.g., “I am a worthy member of the counseling profession to which I belong”). The second subscale, Private Collective Self-Esteem, measures personal judgments of how positively people view their social groups (e.g., “In general, I’m glad to be a member of the counseling profession to which I belong”). The third subscale, Public Collective Self-Esteem, measures people’s perceptions of how positively their social groups are evaluated by other people (e.g., “Overall, the counseling profession is considered good by others”). The fourth subscale, Importance to Identity Collective Self-Esteem, measures the importance of people’s social group memberships to their self-concepts (e.g., “Overall, my membership in the counseling profession has very little to do with how I feel about myself”). Higher scores are associated with higher levels of collective self-esteem in each domain.

Luhtanen and Crocker (1992) reported that the alpha coefficient of scores ranged from .71 to .88 for the CSES subscales. In addition, the test–retest reliability coefficient was .68 for the total scale. Support for construct validity was obtained through exploratory factor analysis that identified a four-factor solution and confirmatory factor analysis with all goodness-of-fit indexes also indicating an adequate fit to the data (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). CSES scores have also been related to various psychological variables such as personal self-esteem, psychological well-being, and burnout (Bettencourt, Charlton, Eubanks, Kernahan, & Fuller, 1999; Butler & Constantine, 2005; Crocker et al., 1994). Our study revised the CSES to refer specifically to respondents’ social group memberships as counselors. This type of modification has also been used successfully by previous researchers (Butler & Constantine, 2005; Katz et al., 2004). In the present study, Cronbach’s alphas of .66, .70, .63, and .64 were obtained for the Membership, Private, Public, and Importance to Identity Collective Self-Esteem subscales, respectively.

Job dissatisfaction. To measure job dissatisfaction, we used seven items adapted from the National Center for Education Statistics’ National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (Curtin, Ingels, Wu, & Heuer, 2002). The scale measures overall job dissatisfaction as well as dissatisfaction with fringe benefits, opportunities for further training, job security, opportunities for promotion, opportunities to use past training, importance and challenge of the work, and salary (Curtin et al., 2002). According to Nguyen, Taylor, and Bradley (2003), logit regression indicates that overall job dissatisfaction is highly significantly related to all individual domains of job dissatisfaction. Participants answered seven questions through which they rated how dissatisfied they were with their jobs using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = very satisfied, 5 = very dissatisfied). The internal consistency for the scores of all seven items in this study was .81, indicating a high degree of consistency across items.

Client relationships. Participants completed the Devaluing Client subscale of the Counselor Burnout Inventory, which measures counselors’ attitudes and perceptions of their relationships with clients (Lee et al., 2007). Participants answered
four questions using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = never true, 5 = always true). Sample items included "I have little empathy for my clients" and "I am no longer concerned about the welfare of my clients." Higher scores on the subscale indicate a more negative client relationship. Lee et al. reported a positive correlation between items in this subscale and the Depersonalization subscale (i.e., developing negative and unfeeling attitudes toward others) of the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Human Services Survey (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). In this study, internal consistency for all four items of this scale was .80.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and bivariate zero-order correlations among the three variables (job dissatisfaction, collective self-esteem, and client relationships). To test the hypothesis that the four subscales of collective self-esteem measurement would mediate the relationship between job satisfaction and client relationships, we used the three-step tests of mediation suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). In this study, the three-step test for mediation involved (a) regressing the criterion variable (client relationships) on the predictor variable (job dissatisfaction), (b) regressing the mediators (CSES subscales) on the predictor variable (job dissatisfaction), and (c) regressing the criterion variable (client relationships) on both the predictor variable (job dissatisfaction) and the mediators (CSES subscales).

First, univariate regression of the criterion variable (client relationships) onto the predictor variable (job dissatisfaction) was significant, t(131) = 3.64, p < .01, R² = .10, indicating that lower job dissatisfaction was related to better client relationships. Second, multivariate multiple regression on the predictor variable (job dissatisfaction) and on the four mediators (CSES subscales: Membership, Private, Public, and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<td>1. Job dissatisfaction</td>
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<td>2. Membership Collective Self-Esteem</td>
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<td>.53**</td>
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<td>5. Importance to Identity Collective Self-Esteem</td>
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<td>0.68</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.21*</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.37**</td>
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<td>6. Client relationships</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>-.22*</td>
<td>-.28**</td>
<td>-.04</td>
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</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.
Importance to Identity Collective Self-Esteem) was significant on all multivariate fit statistics, Wilks's lambda = .83; $F(4, 127) = 6.01, p < .01$, indicating that job dissatisfaction predicted a significant amount of the variance in the mediators (CSES subscales). As shown in Table 2, follow-up tests revealed that job dissatisfaction significantly predicted participants' scores on the CSES Private Collective Self-Esteem subscale, $t(131) = 4.40, p < .01$, indicating that lower job dissatisfaction predicted greater private collective self-esteem.

Third, a test of the additional variance accounted for when the mediators (CSES subscales) were considered in addition to the predictor variable (job dissatisfaction) was significant, $F(4, 127) = 3.31, p < .05$, $R^2 = .08$. The follow-up tests indicated that job dissatisfaction and the CSES Private Collective Self-Esteem subscale predicted client relationships, indicating that lower job dissatisfaction and greater private collective self-esteem uniquely predicted better client relationships, $t(131) = 2.38, p < .05$ and $t(131) = -2.28, p < .05$, respectively. Complete mediation was not observed because the predictor variable (job dissatisfaction) continued to evidence a significant relationship with the criterion variable (client relationships) in the presence of the mediators (CSES subscales).

Finally, we tested if the amount of mediation was significant. In other words, we investigated whether the regression coefficient between job dissatisfaction and client relationships was reduced in the presence of the four mediating CSES subscales. Following MacKinnon's (2000) research, each of the individual indirect effects (i.e., total reduction) associated with the four mediators was calculated. The total mediated effect was .273, indicating that 27.3% of the variability was explained by a func-

**TABLE 2**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis and Predictor Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>Criterion Variable</th>
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<td>CR</td>
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<td>.01</td>
<td>.83**</td>
<td>6.01**</td>
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<td>.04</td>
<td>.01</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4.40**</td>
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<td>.01</td>
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<td>PCSE</td>
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<td>.01</td>
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<td>0.03</td>
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<td>PuCSE</td>
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<td><strong>Analysis 3</strong></td>
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<td>CR</td>
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<td>.06</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>2.38*</td>
<td>5.36**</td>
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<td>-1.92</td>
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<td>PCSE</td>
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<td>.10</td>
<td></td>
<td>-2.28*</td>
<td></td>
<td>CR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PuCSE</td>
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<td>.08</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td></td>
<td>CR</td>
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<tr>
<td>IICSE</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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</table>

*Note. JD = job dissatisfaction; CR = client relationships; MCSE = Membership Collective Self-Esteem; PCSE = Private Collective Self-Esteem; PuCSE = Public Collective Self-Esteem; IICSE = Importance to Identity Collective Self-Esteem.

*p < .05. **p < .01.
tion of the set of the four mediators on the relationship between job dissatisfaction and client relationships. Only one CSES subscale, Private Collective Self-Esteem (indirect effect = .202, \( SE = .018 \)), significantly mediated the relationship between job dissatisfaction and client relationships (\( z = 1.03, p < .001 \)). The percentage mediated for each of the four mediators as a proportion of the total effect was also calculated to give the following: Membership Collective Self-Esteem = .021 (7.8%), Private Collective Self-Esteem = .202 (73.8%), Public Collective Self-Esteem = .049 (18.1%), and Importance to Identity Collective Self-Esteem = .001 (0.4%).

Next, we tested the alternative hypothesis that CSES subscales (Membership, Private, Public, and Importance to Identity Collective Self-Esteem) moderated the relationship between job dissatisfaction and client relationship. A moderator is a variable that affects the direction and strength of the relationship between a predictor and a criterion variable. The primary purpose for identifying and constructing moderators is to increase predictive effectiveness (Abrahams & Alf, 1972). The test for moderation involved evaluating the interaction between variables (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The moderator model tested the criterion variable (client relationships), the four moderating variables (CSES subscales), and the predictor variable (job dissatisfaction), as well as their four interactions (i.e., Job Dissatisfaction × Membership Collective Self-Esteem, Job Dissatisfaction × Private Collective Self-Esteem, Job Dissatisfaction × Public Collective Self-Esteem, Job Dissatisfaction × Importance to Identity Collective Self-Esteem). As shown in Table 3, significant main effects emerged, \( F(5, 126) = 5.36, p < .01, R^2 = .18 \), but entry of the interaction produced a nonsignificant increment, \( \Delta F(4, 122) = 0.24, p = .92, \Delta R^2 = .01 \). According to the study results, the CSES collective self-esteem subscales did not moderate the relationship between job dissatisfaction and client relationships among professional counselors.

**TABLE 3**

Hierarchical Multiple Regression of Job Dissatisfaction and Collective Self-Esteem on Client Relationships: Testing Moderation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step and Predictor Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>( R^2 )</th>
<th>( \Delta R^2 )</th>
<th>( \Delta F )</th>
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<td>.18**</td>
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<td>MCSE</td>
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<td>PCSE</td>
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<tr>
<td>PuCSE</td>
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<td>.08</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>IICSE</td>
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<td>.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>JD × MCSE</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>JD × PCSE</td>
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<td>.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>JD × PuCSE</td>
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<td>.11</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JD × IICSE</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.11</td>
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*Note. JD = job dissatisfaction; MCSE = Membership Collective Self-Esteem; PCSE = Private Collective Self-Esteem; PuCSE = Public Collective Self-Esteem; IICSE = Importance to Identity Collective Self-Esteem. Step 1 is the main effects of predictor variable and moderators on the criterion variable. Step 2 is the interaction effects of predictor variable and moderators on the criterion variable. ** \( p < .01 \).*
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationships between collective self-esteem, job dissatisfaction, and client relationships. Of initial significance are the mean CSES subscale scores appearing in the moderate to high range (3.65 to 4.38). Some researchers (Brott & Myers, 1999; Gale & Austin, 2003) have argued that professional counselors lack a sense of professional identity because of the variety of their training programs from different accrediting bodies and multiple professional organizations that hold opposing positions. However, our findings suggest that professional counselors experience a relatively positive sense of professional identity, despite these training and position differences.

Consistent with previous studies (Butler & Constantine, 2005; Zang & Leung, 2002), results from this study indicate that counselors’ perceptions about the counseling profession (i.e., counselors’ private collective self-esteem) affect their job satisfaction and client–counselor relationships (i.e., apathetic views toward clients). The results indicate that collective self-esteem, specifically private collective self-esteem, mediates, rather than moderates, the relationship between job dissatisfaction and client relationships. That is, 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. Interpretation of these findings suggests that perceptions of how positively counselors evaluate their social groups (i.e., the counseling profession) partly account for the relationship between job dissatisfaction and client relationships. Conversely, no significant interaction effects result between the job dissatisfaction variable and the collective self-esteem moderating variables on the client relationship variable. Therefore, the CSES subscales of collective self-esteem are not moderators between job dissatisfaction and client relationships.

Our study results indicate that professional counselors’ collective self-esteem accounts for 27.3% of the relationship between job dissatisfaction and client relationships. Of the four CSES subscales, Private Collective Self-Esteem is responsible for the majority (73.8%) of the mediated effect observed, suggesting that attending to counselors’ private collective self-esteem may prevent or alleviate their symptoms of apathy toward clients. In other words, supervisors could discuss counselors’ attitudes toward the counseling profession to help address unsettled role conflict and ambiguity in the work environment that may potentially result in professional impairment. Thus, identifying counselors’ private collective self-esteem could be a valuable supplementary supervisory tool for supporting productive discourse within supervisory relationships.

No causal inferences can be drawn from the statistical mediation of this study (Skowron et al., 2004). A further limitation of this study is the inability to generalize the results because of the study’s sample. In addition, the large variance in client relationships, possibly because of the skewed gender distribution, remains unexplained in this study. Finally, the measures used in this study are self-report instruments based on counselors’ perceptions, which could allow individual response biases or inaccuracies to enter the analyses. Future research is needed to replicate these findings using alternate construct measures to validate the study results.
This study supports the importance of professional identity (personal perceptions of the counseling profession) in alleviating counselors' apathetic attitudes toward their clients, especially when the counselors are dissatisfied with their jobs. The findings can be discussed within supervisory relationships. Supervision can guide professional counselors, especially novice counselors, into the professional culture by helping them develop their counselor identity (O'Byrne & Rosenberg, 1998). Miller and Dollarhide (2006) stressed that supervision contributes very significantly to the development of professional identity. Thus, ongoing supervision is essential for both those entering the counseling profession and experienced counselors because clinical supervision not only helps novice counselors shape their professional identity but also helps experienced counselors strengthen their positive professional identity (Miller & Dollarhide, 2006).

In light of the importance of counselors' professional identity, ongoing supervision should focus on the development of counselors' positive views of counseling. Particularly, supervisors can help counselors experience mattering to clients, as well as expressing the clients' mattering to counselors, as a part of promoting counselors' positive views of client relationships (Dixon Rayle, 2006b). Dixon Rayle (2006b) suggested that counselors could use verbal and nonverbal methods (e.g., verbal reminding, active listening, empathetic reflection, and follow-up) to express how clients matter to them. Thus, supervisors can encourage counselors to remind their clients on a regular basis of how the clients matter to them. Through education, supervisors can increase counselors' knowledge and understanding concerning the phenomenon of mattering. Moreover, with help from their supervisors, counselors can explore their client relationships and how the mattering experience relates to their views of their client relationships. In addition, counselor training programs focusing on professional identity need to be developed to help both novice counselors and experienced counselors. Both counselors in training and experienced counselors would benefit from being prepared to meet the needs of diverse clients, thus reducing the possibilities that counselors would devalue their clients. Furthermore, counselors obtaining continuing education related to various aspects of professional identity would gain information valuable in updating their professional abilities and further evaluating their perceptions of the counseling profession.

REFERENCES


