

Sources by Which Students Perceive Professional Counselors' Effectiveness



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Using qualitative research methods, interviews were conducted with college students regarding the sources they used in generating perceptions of professional counselors. Respondents believed that information sources such as word of mouth, media sources and personal experiences were responsible for their understandings of professional counselors. The findings have applications for leaders in professional counseling organizations. Common knowledge characteristics, public perceptions, counselor identity and advocacy are discussed.

Keywords: perceptions, professional counselors, information sources, counselor identity, advocacy

Perceptions do not equal reality. However, perceptions eventually can lead to what reality becomes in time. All professions possess public perception. When someone refers to doctors, lawyers, dentists, and other specialized occupational groups, images are created in our minds. These percepts possess varying degrees of reality, of course, but the effects of such images are cogent nonetheless. Of particular interest to the present study is the perception of human service personnel, including professional counselors.

As a whole, the human service profession has landed itself on the positive side of the public's opinion spectrum (Nunnally & Kittross, 1958). McGuire and Borowy's (1979) research showed a continuum of perceptions held by the lay public regarding a wide range of professionals who worked with mental illness. Those occupying the fields of nursing, physicians, counseling psychologists, social workers, psychiatric nurses, psychiatrists, and clinical psychologists received the highest rankings.

Undergraduate students' opinions regarding effectiveness of various human service providers for helping mental health consumers were reported by Tse, Wantz, and Firmin (2010) and Wantz and Firmin (2011). Participants in these studies rated human service providers' effectiveness more positive than negative. Professional counselors and psychologists were rated more effective with providing mental health services than other human service providers.

Richardson and Handal (1995) found the general public viewed psychotherapy as a reasonably effective means of treatment for between 25 and 50% of all cases. Most people also recognized that services of *less traditional* human service providers, such as marriage and family therapists, also could be used effectively in relation to particular disorders. Psychiatrists and psychologists, however, were perceived as having higher levels of competence when addressing mental health issues (Schindler, Berren, Hannah, Beigel, & Santiago, 1987). Educational attainment (Dotson-Blake, Know, & Holman, 2010), chronological maturity (Erikson, 1963; Oliver, Reed, & Smith, 1998), and psychosocial development (Tinsley, Hinson, Holt, & Tinsley, 1990) have been reported to be positively correlated with perceived benefits of counseling.

Murstein and Fontaine (1993) found familiarity of the general public to be greater concerning physicians, clergypersons, and psychiatrists than it was in their knowledge of psychotherapists and psychologists. Consequently, of the two, psychologists were the source the general public was most likely to use when recommending a human service

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provider. Also reported, the most common reasons for which clients sought mental health professionals were mild depression, marital problems, and child-rearing issues. A generation ago, Gelso, Brooks, and Karl (1975) reported mental health consumers' overall preferences to be for counseling psychologists and psychiatrists.

Sharpley (1986) purported a tendency for mental health consumers to separate human service professionals into two categories, each entailing distinct perspectives. First, private practice and fee-for-service providers, psychologists and psychiatrists being the most prominent, were viewed as those who were most competent in treating mental illnesses. Second, public-utility and non-fee-demanding professionals, of which social workers and counselors prominently emerged, were perceived as being more practical and apt in providing service to the average person when addressing emotional problems.

Among the various human service professionals, counselors are of particular interest to the present study. Sharpley, Bond, and Agnew (2004) indicated that the public views counselors' roles to be primarily listening, supporting, and helping to solve problems. While 79% said counselors were needed, and the same number indicated a willingness to pay for services provided, survey respondents personally were likely to consult a counselor concerning only 13–20% of the problems they faced. Participants also reported benefits of counseling to include having an impartial person to listen and help clarify, as well as having a facilitator for problem-solving, and meeting in a safe, confidential environment.

Fall, Levitov, Jennings, and Eberts (2000) described the public's expressed general confidence in professional counselors' abilities to treat "less serious" cases, but less confidence when treating cases which were perceived to be at higher levels of seriousness (e.g., psychopathology). These findings are congruent with those found by Fall, Levitov, Anderson, and Clay (2005) specifically studying the perceptions of the African-American population. In both studies, the participants expressed significantly greater levels of confidence in the abilities of psychiatrists when addressing severe issues, such as psychotic depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. Findings further showed that doctoral-level counselors were perceived similarly to clinical psychologists, while both studies showed that in every case professional counselors with doctorates were preferred over those with only master's-level education. Wantz, Firmin, Johnson, and Firmin (2006) reported on university student perceptions of high school counselors. This qualitative study found college students reported high school counselors as having similar empathic and desire to help skills as licensed professional counselors.

Dixon, Vrochopoulos, and Burton (1997) reported the underrepresentation of counseling psychologists in introductory psychology textbooks, showing counseling to have significantly fewer references than clinical, school, and industrial psychologists. Likewise, Firmin, Johnson, and Winkler's (2005) research showed almost no references to professional counselors in general psychology texts. Consequently, we conclude that while the public generally possesses positive perceptions of professional counselors, their presence is kept somewhat cryptic by the gatekeepers. College-educated students depend on introductory psychology texts to frame for them professional domains and functions among human service professionals.

As counselors have achieved professional status through licensure over the last two decades, identity confusion has been demonstrated by the practitioners within the field (King, 2006). Inevitably, this perplexity has trickled down to the minds of mental health practice consumers regarding distinctions and roles of professional counselors. Consequently, while the public generally likes the construct of who they think of as counselors, they also are unsure of these professionals' roles (Butterfield, 1989).

Decades ago, Dahlem (1969) called for the vital need to research the general public's perception of counselors' images and role perceptions, compared to counselors' self-perceptions. He stressed the importance of clarifying consumers' understandings and perceptions in relation to the success of the providers. Gelso and McKenzie (1973) followed up, studying ways in which students were informed of counselors' available assistance. Students receiving only written information about hypothetical problems appropriate for counseling were less likely to experience changes of perceptions. This suggested that the most effective way to impact students' impressions concerning counselors would be the presentation of written and oral information.

Narrowing the scope, the present study updates this important research inquiry. Specifically, our interests were to explore how college students, as potential consumers of mental health services, came to their understandings of counselors' professional competence. That is, how effective do students perceive professional counselors to be? Obviously, since such perceptions are tied to students' ultimate use of counselors' services, the answers to the research question have significant implications for personnel working in college counseling settings.

Method

In accomplishing the study's aim of assessing how college students generate their perceptions of professional counselors, we considered a number of potential research designs. While quantitative methods such as surveys would provide us with a relative breadth of understanding in this area (Patten, 1998) and this would be valuable, we believed such an approach would not be as apt as a qualitative design. Generally, quantitative approaches answer "what" or "how many" types of questions (Sarafino, 2005). However, we were more interested in knowing answers to "how" and "why" types of questions. These, by and large, are best answered via qualitative designs (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003).

At the outset, we are explicit regarding our decision in using an atheoretical approach to the qualitative method. Significant and heated debate presently exists in qualitative circles regarding whether one should or should not use theory—and if so, what that role should be. Originally Glaser and Strauss (1967) advocated that atheoretic, inductive approaches were the only means of generating a grounded theory. Later, Strauss and Corbin (2008) purported that theory was legitimate and useable for some qualitative research designs. Glaser (1992), however, vehemently opposed this departure from the classical approach indicating that researchers must exercise disciplined restraint in holding back theory when generating or interpreting results.

Obviously, we are not going to abate the controversy in this article, but we do wish to be explicit in reporting our commitment to classical grounded theory. That is, philosophically we believe that phenomenological studies such as the present one should be conducted inductively—holding theory at bay. While we understand the implications and even potential limitations of this approach, we believe it to be most apt, nonetheless.

A sample of 26 students was drawn from a general psychology course (16 females and 10 males). The institution was a selective, private comprehensive university located in the Midwest. Departing from traditional criterion or purposeful sampling most often used with qualitative research (Seidman, 2006), we used random sampling for this study because we wished to enhance the external validity of our findings as much as feasible. That is, the trade-off of expanded generalizability was believed to be worth the expense of potentially less rich descriptions through specifically selected students. Since the general psychology course was part of the liberal arts core curriculum at the institution, our sample reflected a relatively wide cross-section of majors, included students who were freshmen through seniors, and participants' ages ranged from 18 to 22 years of age. Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed for analysis. In writing the present article, we used respondent pseudonyms for reading clarity.

We utilized a semi-structure method in conducting the in-depth interviews. We used staple constructs for generating questions, but also allowed students to deviate in their replies, enabling them to tell their own stories and share perceptions inductively. Following Firmin (2006a), two waves of interviews were conducted. That is, all participants were interviewed twice—with transcription and coding occurring in between the interviews. This allowed for constant comparison of the data and dialogue among the researchers for generating potential codes.

When analyzing the interviews, we used an open (Maxwell, 2005) coding, inductive process (Marshall, 1999). Since we located no studies published on this topic, axial coding was not practical and open coding was more consistent with the study's exploratory aim. Frequent meetings among the article's authors occurred and this process facilitated coding, providing verifications for consistency of analysis. When generating potential codes, we read through the transcripts, utilizing constant comparison methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This involved continuously comparing the transcripts to one another, looking for any repeating words, phrases, or constructs that were common among the participants. In order to keep the data manageable, some similar categories were collapsed into major categories. NVIVO qualitative research software also was used to help analyze data. This program helps to manage relatively large amounts of transcript

documentation as well as aid in the generation of reliable themes across multiple participant data sets. This technology enhanced human capability, and it did not replace the role of subjective judgments required to conduct intuitive work (Lewins & Siver, 2007). Following Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009), the process of transitioning from codes to themes involved asking key questions, conducting organizational review, visually displaying the findings, and concept mapping.

The research team's dialogue regarding potential thematic outcomes enhanced the study's internal validity. Naturally, one researcher can appropriately analyze data and provide apt findings. Nonetheless, the assurance of valid findings often is enhanced when multiple qualitative researchers participate in the analysis process (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). We included in this article only those themes on which the entire research team concurred. The study's internal validity also was strengthened through generating a data trail (Daytner, 2006). This involved generating direct connections between each reported theme in our transcripts through identifying specific paragraphs within the interview conversations. Data trails can be useful to those who wish to check the validity of our reported findings or who hope to someday replicate or advance our present study (Firmin, 2006b).

Third, member checks (Merriam, 2002) were applied with various research participants. This is a qualitative research technique whereby we shared our findings with research subjects, garnering their feedback regarding how reported results aptly reflected their reported perceptions during the interview process. Each of the individuals with whom we checked commonly agreed with our reported results. Fourth, we strengthened the study's internal validity by including participation from an independent researcher with renowned expertise in qualitative methodology (Flick, 2006). This expert appraised the steps at each stage of the study, the legitimacy of our process, assessed our data audit, and provided analysis regarding linking the transcripts data with the results. Fifth, saturation (Silverman, 2006) occurred when analyzing the transcript data. Specifically, after approximately 24 interviews, our participants generally shared similar sentiments, with few fresh insights added as subsequent interviews were added to the sample. In the qualitative tradition of experts such as Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) and Neuman (2006), we believe our sample size was both ample and appropriate for the context of this specific study.

In summary, internal validity is a critical component in delineating appropriate qualitative research (Cope, 2004). Weightier confidence may be placed in the reported themes, that they adequately represent the general sentiments of the research participants when particular, deliberate steps are taken. Both in the study's design and its implementation, we believe this project demonstrates rigor by established qualitative research standards (DeWet & Erasmus, 2005) and an apt grounded theory of the data collected (Lundberg & Young, 2005).

Results

Upon examination of the interviews, several themes emerged from the coded transcripts. Primarily, respondents discussed their awareness of sources such as the media, word of mouth, and personal experience in the development of opinions regarding professional counselors. Further, respondents discussed characteristics of a "common knowledge" upon which consumers draw in their utilization or hesitancy of seeking counseling services. Finally, responses delineated the perceived effects of this common knowledge on the reputation of counseling.

Three Sources

Repeatedly, respondents spoke of three main sources on which they depended in generating their opinions of professional counselors' effectiveness. Respondents particularly mentioned the contribution of media sources such as radio, newspapers, television, and movies, along with the more personal and implicative sources of word of mouth and personal experience. Considered holistically, this amalgamated into a nebulous resource of *common knowledge*. One respondent defined common knowledge as "general sources," implying the prevalent accessibility of this information.

Consistent with the sample's generational factors, responses repeatedly indicated the role of the media in their concept formation of who professional counselors are and what they do. Janet explained that "common knowledge would probably be just things they've heard on TV or seen on TV," revealing the expectation of what a professional counseling session should theoretically cover and how a session should appear. Media also sharply influenced perceptions of what a

counselor and client should look like (i.e., personal dress and hygiene) and even where these services are located (e.g., in a swanky hospital wing or in urban city slums). Pete specifically mentioned the impact Hollywood had on the formation of his own perceptions, indicating no coincidence in the congruity of college students' expectations with media depictions.

Fortunately, respondents spoke with a voice of relative discernment, aware of the possible slants injected into information relayed by the media. Injecting a sense of humor, Jason admitted: "I know I was watching TV the other day, I think it was *Growing Pains*, or something like that, and they were talking about it [counseling] so that's how I know." Not credulous to the media portrayal, he continued: "Like they have no problems in life, everything's going smooth for them . . . people that have no problems and are like happy all the time . . . that's not true." While not all respondents explicitly expressed this intuition, they generally did note the connotations associated with counseling by the media. For example, Coleen noticed the subliminal messages as she watched movies or television shows: "It's usually like TV and movies just have different characters in them and it usually seems like a negative type thing. . . I think that they make it seem like it's [counseling] a weird place to go and it's not a fun thing." Clearly, the media is not a bias-free information source, but requires active examination on the part of the viewer.

Numerous respondents mentioned the place that word of mouth had in the formation of their perceptions about counselors. Where personal experience waned and media fell short of credibility, respondents turned to testimonies of people they know who were counseled first-hand and held credence. When asked to describe sources of common knowledge regarding her perceptions of counselors, Barb offered: "I think a lot of people would be, maybe from people they know, who have been to one, who are one [professional counselor]." Respondents feel that no matter the strength of the connection, be it from a friend-of-a-friend or from the mouth of a professional counselor, hearing of others' encounters considerably influences perception formation. Making judgments on topics with which respondents are personally unfamiliar (i.e., no personal experience in counseling) is alleviated when backed by the testimony of personal references.

Dan mentioned the input of "the whole movies and TV and media" in passing, but pointed to word of mouth as the primary information hub about how he developed his percepts regarding counselors. His assertion that word of mouth is the primary means rests on another assumption, "I'm sure probably the majority of the people don't go to counseling," highlighting that where personal experience lacks, the information network through word of mouth becomes prominent in concept formations. Dan concluded: "I think that in general it's the word of mouth because you always know someone who's been through something or doing something and has had to go to counseling." Respondents believed that personal encounters with counselors by their friends were a rarity, and in a sense a commodity, taking what they heard at face value. As such, their collections of personal testimonies were typically sparse. Johanna considered word of mouth to be the prominent common knowledge source when thinking about counselors, as she stated: "I haven't really read up on them or anything, but just based on what people have said, that's where I've gotten my perspective from." Even more, Johanna looked to her immediate context: "For me it would be more of adults, like parents, parents' friends, stuff like that." Speaking from the periphery, students gain perspective based on other's comments.

When accessible, respondents relied on personal experience and interactions of acquaintances as their main contributors to their knowledge base about professional counselors. No matter how insignificant the interaction, respondents preferred personal encounters or those of close friends, more so than media or other sources, in their concept formations. For example, Emma drew on memories from elementary school: "Just like experiences in elementary school where counselors came around and talked like 'don't do drugs and things like that.'" Respondents readily admitted their recollections may be somewhat "fuzzy," but nonetheless preferred these to more broad sources.

The context of "home" was imperative for perception formation about counselors among respondents in our sample. Specifically, respondents heavily relied on past experiences to formulate opinions about new concepts or in discussing unfamiliar territory. Carla offered this insight: "I suppose it could be something that has come from their background or their family life." Familial beliefs are known to possess cogent influences in multiple life domains such as politics, religion, prejudice, etc. In the present context, our students suggested that generational influences play a moderating role in perceptions of professional counseling.

As the majority of respondents could not draw from personal experience, the testimony of friends often was their closest connection to professional counselors. Stephanie mentioned that common knowledge was a salient influence in how she came to think of counselors. Later, she elaborated this could be from talking with “friends that went to go see a counselor” and who could fill in the gaps of her understanding. Randy affirmed the power generated when he will “hear other people’s experiences.” Obviously, respondents in our sample could not judge the relative quality of their friends’ experiences or the degree of truth represented by their friends’ accounts. But hearing what their friends told them left indelible impressions, nonetheless.

Common Knowledge Characteristics

Upon examination of their information sources, respondents reflected on the characteristics of their sources. Specifically, respondents mentioned that their knowledge about unfamiliar topics such as professional counselors may have little-to-no factual basis or may be unreliable. Mandy shared that respondents evaluate counselors by “just what they think they know. It might not necessarily come off of anything.” Respondents often were aware of this vulnerable reasoning, but when asked to offer their opinions, they drew on the ambiguous *common knowledge* anyhow. Linda stated her perception that this concept was “possibly general statistics or people’s assumptions about professional counselors, not necessarily what’s true.” In consideration of the often inaccurate portrayal of counselors through movies, magazines, and additional sources of media, these assumptions may differ widely from reality. Kevin offered this reasoning about how common knowledge affects perceptions about counselors: “People . . . think they know stuff about stuff, and really don’t. . . . So that’s why the majority of people don’t even know much about counselors and stuff like that. They hear one thing, and generalize it about everybody.” The tendency to generalize can be potentially beneficial, depending on the accuracy of the source, of course. This principle has important ramifications for the development of counseling as a potential profession.

A second characteristic of common knowledge in our study is an inability of participants to recall the sources from which the information comes. Clearly, when making decisions such as choosing counseling services, knowing potential sources behind the motivation for utilizing them are important. Lori mentioned that students often rely on “things from a long time ago that they may not remember specifically” in order to evaluate the positive or negative effects of seeking professional counseling services. Similar to Rob’s tendency to generalize, our subjects’ distant recollections were said to be formative in their perceptions, however accurate they may or may not be. Steve elucidated that this source of common knowledge may be far removed from the true source: “Like second and third hand information about people who have gone to counselors, again television and movies, the joke from the Sunday newspaper, you know.” Perceptions for these students are formulated from a conglomeration of sources, credible or not, evidently even from the comics section of the Sunday newspaper.

While respondents relied heavily on word of mouth, Jordan did speak of the possible flaws in this resource: “I guess from other people talking to them about it. You can’t just know, obviously, but obviously they don’t remember where they’ve heard it from.” While acquaintances and peers may be eager to share their opinions, our subjects evidently often were unable to support their opinions with factual sources. Cathy concurred in stating that common knowledge of counselors is generated by “probably a little bit of what they fill in, what they assume.” Not only are their potential sources emitting their own assumptions, but the respondents fall prey to the same tendency in order to compensate for lack of information. Sandy further clarified, “it may just be, I assume they’re this way, but they really didn’t base that off of anything,” again revealing the flaws in their apt perception formation.

Effects of Common Knowledge

Without doubt, the lack of verifiable validity found in common knowledge about counselors creates powerful effects for the advancement of counseling as a profession. Namely, not only is the reputation of services potentially marred, but respondents also may be less likely to seek out counseling when needed due to their incorrect assumptions and faulty sources. Respondents reported feeling that the media, through movies, magazines or books, too often generates negative connotations with professional counseling images. Rachel noted: “I think that it [media] negatively affects their perception of professional counselors.” When prodded to share more, she continued: “A lot of times in TV and in movies they’re portrayed as odd people so I guess that’s the image that a lot of people have, because going back to their philosophy in

the way they conduct their counseling.” Most definitely, “odd” is not a positive connotation to associate with professional counseling. In times of need, respondents likely will not seek out a source they consider to be odd. Larry offered a similar insight in his comment: “Probably that they’re just people who sit there and they try and make you talk to them even though you don’t want to and, I don’t know, probably the same thing that they would be with a psychologist.” This statement is loaded with several faulty assumptions, ubiquitous in other students’ comments. First, respondents tend to believe counselors *force* their clients to talk about issues when they do not wish to receive counsel, or that their sessions consist more of passive listening, where clients ramble as the counselor nods occasionally and interjects the expected empathetic reflection. Second, this respondent offhandedly equated counselors with psychologists, illuminating the lack of public awareness in deciphering services offered by counselors compared to psychologists.

Students indicated that the connotations afforded by common knowledge sources of professional counselors sometimes are positive and sometimes negative, depending on the source. Molly used media news as a concrete example: “Well, usually if they hear it in the news it will be negative, if the counselor screws up, they’ll hear that, and it might give them a bad image.” She continued that one negative news report could be potent enough to prevent her or others from ever seeking a professional counselor, regardless of the intensity of the personal need. Similarly, Kim thinks that movies could “go either way” and the audience “can either think of a positive image of counselors that they really do help someone, or they can portray them as people who are out of touch with reality and don’t really help the person necessarily.” This phenomenon follows the similar vein relative to the equivocal nature of these sources. Clearly, the common knowledge phenomenon affects the realm of professional counseling by impacting not only expectations of a session on the part of the counselor or the client, but also regarding the tendency to seek professional counseling services.

Discussion

We believe that due deliberation of our findings are warranted on two levels: macro and micro. On the macro level, professional organizations must become more aggressive in advocating for the profession in media and other “common knowledge sources.” Specifically, we interpret our results as a clarion call to the American Counseling Association (ACA), the American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA), and the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC).

In the past decade, how many times has a major motion picture made central references to a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)? A systematic assessment in answering this important question is warranted elsewhere. However, the authors of the present article are unaware of a single time when this has occurred. We do recall, of course, main characters visiting psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and even marriage & family therapists. But, it is completely unacceptable for Hollywood to ignore licensed professional counselors.

Our findings suggest that movies are powerful sources by which the public come to generate their perceptions of professional counselors. When movies ignore the profession, then it follows that counselors become vulnerable to unhealthy stereotypes, negative perceptions, or simply empty perceptions. The role of professional counseling organizations is to advance the profession—and our data suggests that much more needs to be done in this domain.

To be more specific, every time a major motion picture is released where main characters interact with human service professionals that are not counselors—advocacy must occur. That is, leaders of ACA, AMHCA, NBCC, state counseling organizations, and others need to issue united statements of protest. Media such as the *Associated Press* need to pick up on these protests, carrying complaints of professional counselors’ lack of Hollywood notice.

To proactively accomplish this, the professional organizations must make permanent connections with producers, directors, writers, and other influential individuals in Hollywood as scripts are generated. Hollywood needs to be aware that if they ignore professional counselors as potential sources of human service provision, then the professional counseling organizations will become active. It should be worth their while to ensure that an apt, positive representation of counselors occurs.

On the micro level, individual counselors must be more active when advertising their services to the public.

Specifically, the local media should be utilized to portray positive messages about professional counselors and benefits of service utilization. Local news media frequently look for short stories or opinions from human service professionals on various topics. This particularly is true around holidays or other special occasions—or even traumatic events—when media generate special interest stories. Local television specials can be powerful mediums for perception formation among families and potential clients. Universities with communication arts programs can budget monies for student and/or professionally generated DVDs that highlight and promote professional counselors as quality options during times of personal need.

The same advocacy can occur with school newspapers, web sites, circulars, and other sources of “common knowledge.” Respondents from the present study indicated that media is a powerful source and influences their perceptions. Professional counselors, therefore, should seize this medium—using it to generate reoccurring positive messages.

Respondents also told us that parental opinions, former clients, information from friends, and other word of mouth sources were important in how they came to think of professional counselors. There is little that counselors can do to encourage positive word of mouth advertising for professional counselors. However, they can utilize the media to its fullest.

On both macro and micro levels, we are concerned about professional counselors’ general tendencies towards passivity. That is, counselors presently are at the mercy of how happenstance may occur in clients’ lives to formulate perceptions of counselors. Rather, counselors should architect how they want potential clients to think about them. Draft the message and then market it through public service announcements, movies, the media, and other sources that consumers say are important to their concept formations. In short, be proactive rather than *laissez-faire* on this important matter.

Limitations and Future Research

We believe the present research study provided an apt representation of the students interviewed. However, as with all qualitative research, external validity is a limitation. That is, while replication is important for quantitative research (Cumming, 2005), qualitative research is particularly context dependent, relying on replication ultimately to prove its generalizability (Firmin, 2006b). In this light, we are limited in our ability to apply the present findings to all students at all universities in the United States or the public in general. Further research should replicate this study, assessing students and potential clients in varying parts of the country. Further, national survey data should be collected—providing more breadth to our present findings—although, of course, breadth and depth acquisitions tend to be methodological tradeoffs.

No minority representation was included in the present sample. Of course they were not deliberately excluded; rather, the general psychology class from which the sample was drawn contained only a few minority students. By random sample chance they were not included. As previously indicated, we used random sampling of the students in the study in order to enhance external validity as much as possible. The university from which the sample was taken contains only a 6% total minority population. Consequently, further research should be conducted in this area, possessing greater numbers of minority students in those samples. Also, replicating the present qualitative study with all minority students would provide an interesting comparison to the present findings from a Caucasian sample.

In sum, we believe that the present study has powerful heuristic value. Researchers should take this concept and develop it much further than what we were able to do in the present design. Assuming that professional counseling is going to develop and flourish in the upcoming decades, then the call we make for proactive advocacy must be heard. Students and the public have perceptions of professional counselors. That simply is a fact of human nature. It behooves the professional counselor leaders as well as individual counselors to craft what they wish those perceptions to be.

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