

Professional Identity in Guidance and Counseling: The Perspective of Prospective Counselors

(Identitas Profesional Bimbingan dan Konseling: Perspektif Calon Konselor)

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Abstract: This study aims to describe prospective counselors' perceptions of professional identity concepts in the guidance and counseling field. This study used a qualitative approach with an exploratory, descriptive design. Research data were collected through open questionnaires and focus group discussions. The data sources were fifteen guidance and counseling students from three different classes. Data analysis was carried out by searching for themes and determining the correlation between them to attain interpretation. The results of the study show that professional identity is conceptualized as a typical characteristic or a symbol of professional conduct in the profession of guidance and counseling. Meanwhile, the dimensions of professional identity according to students are categorized into professional competence, personality, personal appearance, knowledge of the profession, and professional ethos. Lastly, for the student, professional identity is something that moves dynamically.

Keywords: professional identity; guidance and counseling; students' perceptions; exploratory method

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan persepsi calon konselor terhadap konsep identitas profesional dalam bidang bimbingan dan konseling. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain deskriptif eksploratif. Data penelitian dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terbuka dan diskusi kelompok terfokus. Sumber datanya adalah lima belas mahasiswa bimbingan dan konseling dari angkatan yang berbeda. Analisis data dilakukan dengan cara mengidentifikasi topik dan menentukan keterkaitan untuk mencapai interpretasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa identitas profesional dikonseptualisasikan sebagai ciri khas atau simbol perilaku profesional dalam profesi bimbingan dan konseling. Sedangkan dimensi identitas profesional menurut mahasiswa dikategorikan terdiri dari kompetensi profesional, kepribadian, penampilan pribadi, pengetahuan profesi, dan etos kerja profesional. Selain itu, mahasiswa juga mempersepsikan identitas profesional bimbingan dan konseling merupakan sesuatu yang bergerak dinamis.

Kata kunci: identitas profesional; bimbingan dan konseling; persepsi mahasiswa, metode eksplorasi

INTRODUCTION

Universally, the development of the professional identity in guidance and counseling is defined as professional development, which is difficult to be understood and articulated properly, even by the counselors themselves. The explanation of counselors' identity, what they stand for, their importance, and their differences have been documented in the literature (Gignac & Gazzola, 2016). In the United States, although the focus of counselors, as a growing profession, has shifted from guiding jobs to comprehensive school counseling, the problem of professional identity persists today (Cinotti, 2014).

The authentic and accurate definition of a counselor has become a serious debate in the academic field (Gybers & Henderson, 2012). One of the available views suggests that a counselor should have a scientific-educational background, while the other view requires the counselor to have a psychological background (Cinotti, 2014; Gybers & Henderson, 2012; Mariotti, McAuliffe, Grothaus, West-Olatunji, & Snow, 2019). The issue of professional counselor identity is also influenced by the inconsistent term used in referring to a counselor, in which some people use "guidance counselor" or a "school counselor" (Dekruyf, Auger, & Trice-Black, 2013; Zyromski, Hudson, Baker, & Granello, 2018). According to Schumacher (2017), a profession's clear definition affects public perception, as well as reflects the professional identity, knowledge, and abilities related to the level of job satisfaction. Besides, the definition of a profession is related to identity, background, and work title.

In addition, the study on counselors' identity is substantial due to the current wide range of notions and interpretations of their professional identity. Consequently, it induces ambiguity in the concept of professional identity in counseling, affecting the welfare and performance of counselors (Havlik, Ciarletta, & Crawford, 2018; Upton, 2012). A study conducted by Woo, Lu, Harris, and Cauley (2017) discovers that research on counseling professional identity is scattered and has not accommodated various scopes of the counselor's workplace, such as the situation during their education process, their counseling services in schools, and their educators.

The recently available definitions of the counselor professional identity concept are quite complex and varied. It is defined as the integration of professional training with personal attributes in the professional community context (Nugent & Jones, 2009). Additionally, the contemporary definitions of professional identity seem to revolve around three themes, namely self-labeling as a professional, integration of skills and attitudes as a professional, and the perception within the professional community. According to Reissetter et al. (2004), professional identity is a view of oneself as a professional that reflects their professional competence, resulting in a compatible personal and professional worldview.

A self-identity development theory proposed by Erikson (Diodato, 2014; Scott, 2018) explained that identity formation occurs when individuals can get through conflicts and crises during adolescence and adulthood (Cardoso, Batista, & Graça, 2014; Erikson, 1968; Karkouti, 2014). This identity development theory was further expanded by James Marcia, added with two dimensions of identity formation, namely exploration and commitment (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). In this expanded theory, there are four identity statuses, namely achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Individuals who have achieved commitment through the exploration process are in achievement status. Meanwhile, individuals in moratorium status are still in the process of exploring and achieving commitments. In foreclosure status, the individuals have achieved commitment by taking the commitments of other people considered significant. Individuals who have not achieved commitment and are undergoing the exploration process are in a diffusion state.

Another study mentions limitations of this identity theory related to the social construction of self-identity in a work or professional environment (Diodato, 2014; Scott, 2018). Professional identity theory was also further analyzed using the symbolic interactionist point of view popularized by George Herbert Mead and Peter J. Burke (Diodato, 2014). The main idea contained in symbolic interactionism lies in the conceptual analysis of how social structures affect individuals and how individuals influence social behavior (Burke, 2004; Burke & Stets, 2009). As a cultural representation, identity does not only in individual form but is also communal. Identity is also interpreted as a sign of the difference in which it is seen as a representation in symbolic and social systems to see distinctions between people (Irawan, Mappiare-AT, & Muslihata, 2018).

Professional identity theory is expanding rapidly, leaving the theory of self-identity. In its later development, professional identity also involves intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions. The intrapersonal dimension is used to describe the individual's view of them in the context of their profession. Meanwhile, the interpersonal dimension represents the individual's relationship with society and the professional organization they are involved, practice, and take a role (Moss, Gibson, & Dollard, 2014). The critical components of professional identity in the guidance and counseling field develop further in a more comprehensive manner (Puglia, 2008; Scott, 2018; H. Woo et al., 2017; H. R. Woo, 2013). The comprehensive components of professional identity formulated in the previous four studies can be used for various professional subjects in guidance and counseling, not only for student counseling but also for counselor practitioners or guidance, counseling teachers, and counselor educators.

Puglia (2008) in general, formulated the counselor's professional identity as integration between self-conformity with counseling philosophy, belief in the profession, and professional engagement. First, the counseling philosophy is a determinant explaining the difference between counseling and other professions, as well as the guidance for their professional measures and practice. Second, belief in the counseling profession is defined as a professional counselor's commitment to becoming a competent person and worker. Third, professional engagement is defined as being active in various professional activities following the expected standards of professional behavior. These professional behaviors have been independently investigated in the research conducted by Herdi, Kartadinata, and Taufiq (2019), which classified six influential factors of the wisdom of a counselor. Different from the structure of professional identity formulated by Puglia (2008), which consists of three components, this six components structure is more detailed and capable of revealing a counselor's professional identity more deeply (Scott, 2018; H. Woo et al., 2017; H. R. Woo, 2013).

Those six components are: (1) demonstrating professional knowledge, (2) articulating the philosophy of the profession, (3) determining the skills required by members of the profession and understanding the professional roles and expertise of members, (4) validating attitudes towards the profession and oneself, (5) engaging in professional behavior expected by members, and (6) interacting with other professionals in the field. H. R. Woo (2013) have developed a Professional Identity Scale in Counseling (PISC) that can explore all subjects, including prospective counselors, counseling practitioners, and counselor educators.

A study conducted by Moss et al. (2014) showed that the development of professional identity is a dynamic process that moves from the prospective counselors' initial education and training period to their active participation in the profession as a professional counselor. Therefore, this study explores students' perceptions of their professional identity as an inseparable part of forming professional competence as prospective counselors.

METHOD

This research was an exploratory-descriptive study that described students' perceptions of professional identity in guidance and counseling. Research data was obtained through open questionnaires and focus group discussions. The questions explored in the open-ended questionnaire revolved around whether the subjects felt that they had a professional identity as a potential counselor, the subjects' perceived professional identity status, and their rationale behind that selection of status. The data sources were fifteen guidance and counseling students from three different classes, five students from each class. The students involved were selected based on their active participation in student activities and individual or group counseling practicum. The focus group discussion was carried out in the form of virtual-asynchronous-synchronous focus group activities (Barbour & Morgan, 2017). The topics discussed in the focus group discussions (FGD) were related to the construction counselor's professional identity concept from the participant's point of view and the dynamic formation and development of that identity during their higher education period.

Participants in discussion activities did not meet face-to-face but through a free learning management system (LMS) platform, namely Google Classroom. The use of internet sites to support this type of discussion activity had also been adopted in research by professional counselors conducted in Ontario, Canada (Gignac & Gazzola, 2016). This asynchronous and synchronous model was used because of its flexibility allowing the participants to reflect and give responses on different days, which makes them feel more comfortable. Besides, the system also facilitates them to post comments or discussions anonymously.

In this study, the researcher became the main instrument. The data obtained from the results of the FGD and interviews were reduced. The results of this reduction were then presented with sub-themes in relatively small groups. Data analysis was carried out with the stages of compiling themes through a series of discussions, negotiations, explorations, and consensus-building. This open communication model was carried out to reduce researcher bias and to resolve the common challenge in the process of drawing conclusions. During the research, each researcher read the transcript in an open coding process, looking for the concepts, categories, properties, and dimensions that characterized each program path (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

RESULTS

The research results are grouped into four themes, namely the concept of professional identity, identity strengthening the boundaries of authority between professions, professional engagement, and the dynamic of professional identity development. The study began with an initial session before the focus group activities were carried out in three meetings. In this initial session, participants were asked to respond to several questions that had been uploaded on google classroom. The first question was, “do you feel you have a professional identity as a potential counselor?” The provided responses to the question were yes, no, and hesitant.

Figure 1 shows that two students (13.3%) feel they do not have a professional identity, while seven students (46.67%) are still hesitant about their professional identity. Meanwhile, six other students (40%) felt confident with their professional identity.

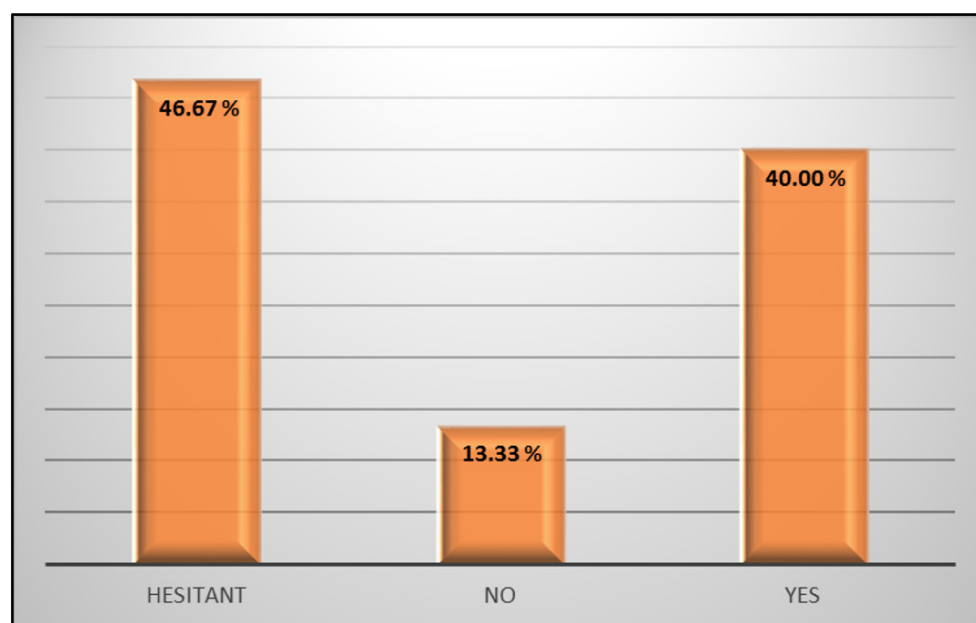


Figure 1. Perception of Possession of Prospective Counselor's Professional

Figure 2 presents the results of the participant's answers to the question of the clarity of their professional identity status that further clarifies the participants' perceived professional identity. The second question was, "what is the status of your professional identity?" The provided responses to this question were clear, less clear, and not clear. There were some shifts from the previous statement. Previously, some students stated that they believed they had an identity, but in the second question, only two (13.33%) students felt that their professional identity was clear. Another 86% of participants stated that they were not confident about their professional identity as a counselor.

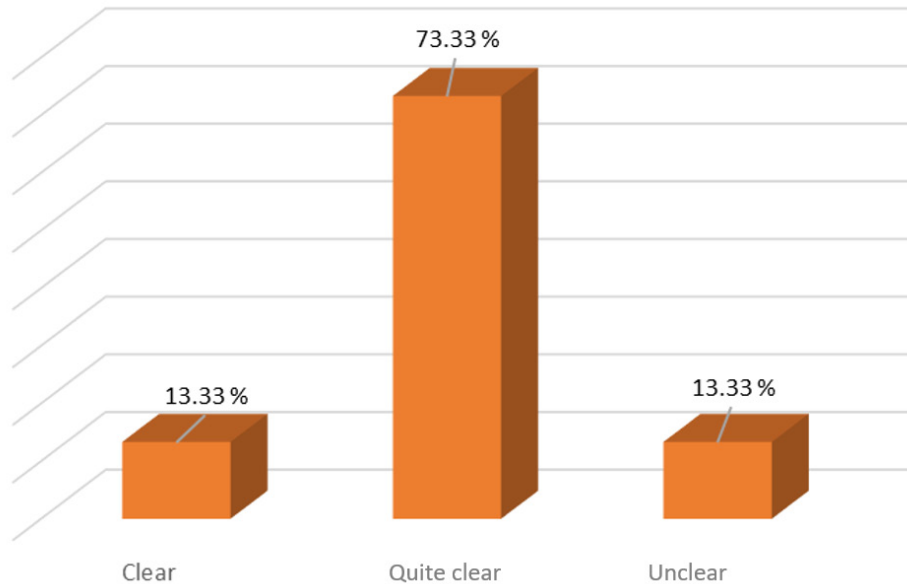


Figure 2. Clarity of Professional Identity Status

According to the initial identification, this study also explores the way students construct an understanding of their professional identity as potential counselors. Based on the results of the exploration conducted on fifteen students, a total of 73 varied open responses were found. After the responses were reviewed, the 73 responses can be grouped into nineteen sub-themes describing students' perceptions of the essence of professional identity (see Table 1).

Professional Identity Concept

This conceptualization of professional identity is a pure understanding constructed by students and is not sourced from reference books or specific references. In general, participants revealed that, in their perspective, a professional counselor is only represented counseling services, as seen from the repeated statements, such as can listen, focus on the counselee, respond, empathize, and be sympathetic.

Participants show that the professional counselor skills rely on the ability to communicate, not be judgmental and emotional regulation (see Table 2). Two of the five participants (class of 2019) viewed the ideal counselor figure is seen from pedagogic competence as the basis for providing guidance and counseling services.

Identity Strengthens the Boundaries of Authority Between Professions

Professional identity is expected to provide a clear distinction between specific professional roles in similar fields, such as psychologist, therapist, and social worker. The results of data reduction can be seen in Table 3.

Participants also revealed that they could distinguish between counselors, teachers, and psychologists in terms of their authority, function, the focus of work, services, and the ultimate goal of providing

Table 1. Themes of Professional Identity Constructed by Students

No	Themes	Class			Total	%
		2018	2019	2020		
1	Have a good mental state	1	1	1	3	4.11
2	Have listening/communication skills	3	2	1	6	8.22
3	Non-judgmental		2	1	3	4.11
4	Keep privacy	1	1	3	3	4.11
5	Theoretical or academic skills	4	2	3	9	12.33
6	Practical skills	2	2	1	7	9.59
7	Patient	1	1	3	3	4.11
8	Self concept	1	1	3	5	6.85
9	Understanding other people or sensitivities	1	3	1	7	9.59
10	Aware of responsibility	1	1	1	3	4.11
11	Work according to procedures	1	1	1	3	4.11
12	Intentions, values, self-motivation to become a counselor	2	1	2	4	5.48
13	Have excellent general characteristics (honest, warm, caring, understanding)	2	1	1	6	8.22
14	Aspects of personality (faith, fear of God)	1	1		3	4.11
15	Appreciate diversity	1	1		2	2.74
16	Consistently pursue a career in the counseling field	1	1		2	2.74
17	Physical aspect/appearance			1	1	1.37
18	Aware of the guidance and counseling issue		2		2	2.74
19	Professional work ethic		1		1	1.37
Total		25	25	25	73	100.00

Table 2. Map Concept of Prospective Counselor's Professional Identity According to Students

No	Class	Meaning of professional identity
1	Class of 2018	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Individual inherent characteristics show their professional behavior in a particular profession. Examples of analogy about self-identity are how I am seen and how I am recognized by others. Identity is a sign or image that describes a professional. The identity of the counselor means a sign that describes the counselor. The markers include the required undergraduate education and professional education, the possessed professional skills, and the way he applies his education in professional behavior. A counselor's ability can be observed from the way he treats others and how he responds to others.
2	Class of 2019	Respondents expressed professional identity as a characteristic and uniqueness that distinguishes one job from another.
3	Class of 2020	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Three out of five respondents expressed professional identity as a characteristic and distinctiveness that distinguishes one job from another. One in five respondents sees professional identity as a form of character that represents the group's profession. One respondent focuses on identity as personal branding that can be "sold" or "shown" in the community.

Table 3. Map of Professional Identity Concept on The Theme of Professional Authority

Response	Data Reduction
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teachers and counselors both focus on developing students academically (same). 2. Counselors or guidance and counseling teachers focus on psychology. 3. Maximize academic potential and knowledge, student behavior (same). 4. Mentally encouraging, changing behavior of students to be more independent. 5. Involving many parties and wider. 6. Counselors can deal with behaviors we can observe. 7. Psychologist – unobservable behavior. 8. The practices are different, the school counselor is not only in the classroom, and the assessment is personal. 9. School counselors focus on normal people. 10. Psychologists focus on clinical and abnormal disease. 11. Both help people to be “healed”. 12. Have a different authorities. 13. Work in Mental Health. 14. The initial goals of the profession differ between psychologists and counselors. 15. School counselors are oriented toward making students independent, while a psychologist heals the clinical conditions. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Respondents can distinguish between counselors and the profession of teachers and psychologists in terms of authority, function, work focus, services provided, and the ultimate goal of the services provided. 2. Respondents can reveal similarities between counselors and the profession of teachers and psychologists in terms of occupational family in the mental health field (with psychologists) and the area of work, namely in education (with subject teachers).

services. Participants were also able to reveal similarities between counselors, teachers, and psychologists regarding their job (similarities with psychologists) and work domain, in the education field (with subject teachers).

Professional Engagement

Based on the statement delivered by participants, one of the markers of professional identity is being involved in professional organizations. Those professional organizations consist of the organization that became the forerunner of the guidance and counseling profession and the organization that has a strengthening impact on the personality aspect of a counselor who can better understand individuals and the process of group dynamics in the organization.

Participants involved in organizations that support the purpose of the guidance and counseling profession reveal numerous positive impacts obtained from such involvement. Those benefits include having broad insight into the guidance and counseling profession, having broad relationships that can facilitate access to self-development, providing opportunities to realize self-existence, improving sensitivity to others, and improving communication and socialization skills.

The Dynamics of the Development of Professional Identity

In the last FGD session (third meeting), participants explored how their inner professional identity developed over time. Some participants also expressed their disbelief when they first choose and joined the guidance and counseling study program. Meanwhile, several participants were influenced by their role models, such as their own parents, who were guidance and counseling teachers/school counselors. Although they have different rationales for selecting the guidance and counseling profession, participants have a positive impression of their guidance and counseling teachers/ school counselors and lecturers when they are still in school, especially during their undergraduate program.

DISCUSSION

Reisetter et al. (2004) define professional identity as a person's perception of themselves as a professional showing their professional competence, resulting in a compatible personal and professional worldview. We obtained 19 sub-themes that describe students' perceptions of professional identity, which include having a good mental state; having listening or communication skills; being non-judgmental; keeping privacy; having theoretical or academic skills; having practical skills; being patients; having self-concept; understanding other people or sensitivities; being aware of responsibility; working according to procedures; having intentions, values, self-motivation to become a counselor; having general characteristics (honest, warm, caring, understanding); having aspects of personality (faith, fear of God); appreciating diversity; consistently pursuing a career in the counseling field; physical aspect/appearance; being aware of the guidance and counseling issue, and having a professional work ethic.

Our finding manifests the close relationship between professional identity and competencies consisting of educational, professional, and personality competencies expected from a school counselor's identity. Puglia (2008) generally characterizes the counselor's professional identity as integration between self-conformity with counseling philosophy, belief about the profession, and professional engagement. The findings are also in line with the concept used in the professional identity scale in counseling (PISC) developed by Woo, Lu, and Bang (2018) consisting of showing knowledge of the profession; articulating the philosophy of the profession (philosophy of the profession); determining the expertise needed by members of the profession and understanding the members' professional roles and expertise; validating attitudes towards the profession and oneself (attitude); engaging in expected professional behavior of members (engagement behavior), and interacting with other professionals in the field (interaction).

The results showed a change in student responses between the results of the initial identification data and the interview. Some students stated they believed they had an identity, but when asked about the clarity of their professional identity, only two (13.33%) students confirmed their clear identity, while the remaining 86% stated not having clarity about their professional identity as a counselor. These findings indicate that professional identity is dynamic. It is in accordance with a study conducted by Moss et al., (2014), showing that the development of professional identity is a dynamic process that moves from the prospective counselors' initial education and training period to their active participation in the profession as a professional counselor.

Professional identity is also interpreted as an element that differentiates one profession from another, professions in the same or different fields. Our participants were capable of distinguishing between counselors, counseling teachers, and psychologists in terms of their authority, function, work focus, services provision, and the ultimate goal of the services. Participants were also able to reveal the similarities between counselors, counseling teachers, and psychologists in terms of their profession cognate in mental health (with psychologists) and work domain in education (with subject teachers).

Up to now, in Indonesia, the guidance and counseling profession requires an appropriate professional identity following the Indonesian context. Therefore, the results of this study can contribute to: (1) the development of a prototype model for measuring professional identity in guidance and counseling, and (2) structuring a policy to increase the professional counselors' capacity and competence based on the dynamics of professional identity.

CONCLUSION

The professional identity of a prospective counselor is conceptualized as an identity, characteristic, or marker that shows their professional behavior in the guidance and counseling profession. These characteristics also distinguish between the counselor profession and other professions operating in the same field. According to students, the concept of professional identity can be grouped into nineteen major sub-themes. These sub-themes can be generically reclassified into the following dimensions, namely professional competence, personality, personal appearance, knowledge of the profession, and

professional ethos. The students' professional identity also moves dynamically. At first, the participants were interested in guidance and counseling while being uncertain of their identity during their initial undergraduate period. Meanwhile, later on, they are influenced by the impression factor of several role models of guidance and counseling.

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