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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Stephanie Jamison-Void

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

Licensure Decisions Among South Carolina Counselors with Master's Degrees

by

Stephanie Jamison-Void

MA, Webster, 2009

BS, Mount Olive College, 2007

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

May 2021

Abstract

Licensure has many benefits to master's level counselors, including higher wages, legal recognition, and third-party reimbursements, however many professional counselors do not pursue licensure. South Carolina graduates of a master's level counseling program are not required to obtain licensure in order to provide counseling services. This qualitative comparative case study was conducted to capture why some counseling graduates choose to pursue licensure and others do not based on the experiences, knowledge, skills, and abilities counseling graduates in transition in South Carolina. The research was informed by social cognitive career theory and social learning for career decision making. Participants included four licensed professionals and two non-licensed master's level clinicians who actively practice counseling in the South Carolina. Semistructured, in-depth interviews were used to gather data. Thematic analysis was employed to examine the data for prominent patterns or trends that may explain the phenomenon of study. Analysis of participant interviews revealed seven key themes: (a) motivation, (b) experience, (c) knowledge, (d) support resources, (e) costs, (f) licensure challenges, and (g) professional challenges. Results revealed a number of ways schools and leaders may help reduce licensure barriers and increase the rate of licensure among South Carolina's professional counselors. Findings from this study may help stakeholders in organizational psychology in South Carolina to reduce licensure barriers or encourage counseling professionals to pursue licensure.

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Dedication

I dedicate this to my husband for being understanding and supportive throughout this process. My children who encouraged me to stay with it and they would prepare dinner. My parents who are in my corner through thick or thin. Also, to my dedicated employees who always test my skills gained through the years.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Credentials distinguish those who have undergone extensive training versus others who may have little or no training (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2020), which is important for those becoming counselors (Eriksen, 1999). Without proper credentials, a master's level professional cannot obtain employment as a licensed professional counselor (LPC). In addition, unlicensed counselors may have a difficult time: (a) acquiring competitive salaries, (b) providing stand-alone signatures on client assessments, and (c) gaining legal recognition from courts or public schools in mandated cases. The credentialing process distinguishes licensed mental health professionals from non-licensed providers, affecting counselors' professional responsibilities and service reimbursements (ACA, 2020). Licensure also signals to the professional, as well as to the public, that a provider has met educational, statutory, and legal requirements to hold a license in their field (Pelling, 2009). However, the pursuit of licensure is not the norm in the field (Reiner et al., 2013).

As mental health students finish their program of study, they are confronted with either becoming a licensed professional or maintaining the status of a non-licensed mental health professional (Koltz & Champe, 2010). But in South Carolina, master's level students graduating from a human services fields such as counseling do not have to take licensure exams to provide counseling services while working in state or local government agencies (South Carolina Labor and Licensing Regulation [SCLLR], 2020). Although the state does offer licensure to counselors, licensure is not required to provide rehabilitative behavioral health services to work as a mental health professional (South

Carolina Department of Health and Human Services [SCDHHS], 2018). Many state agencies such as the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice (SCDJJ), Social Services (SCDSS), or Mental Health (SCDMH) hire master's level non-licensed staff to conduct counseling within the agency without being licensed, as their employees are exempt from licensure standards (SCLLR, 2020). However, the SCDHHS has created job descriptions for human service professionals that conflict with South Carolina's standards for licensed professionals (SCDHHS, 2018). This job involves providing therapy and/or counseling services like a LPC would provide but with the requirement of securing a license after graduation less relevant, as the professionals only need a master's or doctoral degree and 1 year of work experience (SCDHHS, 2018).

The SCDJJ (2014) is a state agency that is a treatment and rehabilitative agency for the juveniles within the state and provides custodial care and rehabilitation for children who are incarcerated, on probation or parole, or have been admitted through community placement for a criminal or status offense). SCDJJ (2014) provides custodial care and rehabilitation for children who are incarcerated, on probation or parole, or have been admitted through community placement for a criminal or status offense. The South Carolina Labor and Licensure Board (SCLLB, n.d.) contracted with the Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE) to manage all applications and application materials for state licensure in many professions.

To obtain licensure in South Carolina, an individual must possess a master's degree or higher in counseling, or a related discipline from school accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP;

Counselor-License, 2020). Applicants must also demonstrate successful completion of a: (a) 3-credit hour graduate level course and (b) 150-hour counseling practicum (Counselor-License, 2014); these requirements must be fulfilled to sit for the licensure examination. After passing the licensure examination, the individual must be listed as an intern for an additional 2 years while undergoing 1,500 hours of supervision by an LPC (Counselor-License, 2020). Supervised practicum experiences are often described as the most important and influential components of counseling and psychotherapy training programs (Linton, 2003).

Background

According to Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013), healthcare is the largest U.S. industry. There are an estimated 18 million individuals employed in healthcare; that number is expected to increase and add another 5 million jobs by 2022 (Borkowski, 2016). As healthcare continues to move in the direction of transformation and reform, it is up to the health care organizations to find individuals to offer quality services (Benson, 2003).

Counseling describes a professional service in which an individual is provided with assistance or advice from another individual (Burks & Steffire, 1979), which takes place in a social setting (Nor, 2020). The focus of counseling is helping individuals resolve problems related to their careers, schools, or families (Burks & Steffire, 1979). In these settings, counselors are problem-solvers who, through direct advice or non-directive guidance, help clients make rational decisions (Gerdard et al., 2017). But becoming a professional counselor is a complex developmental process that is not yet fully

understood (Auxier et al., 2003; Borders, 1989; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). The developmental process has been described as beginning with acceptance into a counselor education program, continuing through graduation, and achieving licensure (Hazler & Kottler, 2005; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Within this process, one of the greatest challenges is to provide an integrated and coordinated program that successfully prepares graduate students in the counseling program to be prepared for practical work (Archer & Cooper, 1998). For instance, practicum students often have poor initial experiences in counseling due to a lack of contact with appropriately motivated and selected clients (Coll et al., 2003).

Supervisors involved with training master's level students have recognized the importance of preparing these trainees as a part of the counselor's development into their career (Lent et al., 2009). Trainee self-efficacy has become central to preparing counselors with the self-confidence and skills needed to perform the tasks associated with their therapist role (Lent et al., 2009). Thus, educational training programs can help graduates secure positions in the mental health field (Lucock & Frost, 2004). But research is lacking on the general transition of mental health professionals to career as professional counselors (Koltz & Champe, 2010). Researchers have discussed factors that influence this transition to help the students develop (Auxier et al., 2003; Jackson & Nelson, 2004; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, 2003); however, the scope of the transitional process to a professional regarding counselors has not been well explored.

Problem Statement

After completing 150 practicum hours required by master's degree programs, master's level staff may practice counseling without licensure, as certification is voluntary (ACA, 2013). The ACA encourages certifications, which many schools provide (Hodges, 2021); however, licensure requirements are up to individual states. Because licensure in South Carolina is strictly voluntary, many master's level counselors practice without licenses. Programs under the SCDHHS and other state agencies allow master's level human service professionals to provide counseling services that are the same as those provided by LPCs (SCDHHS, 2018). The acceptance of non-licensed graduates of a master's level program has reduced the efficacy of licensure requirements in the state of South Carolina; thus, fewer graduates are sitting for licensure examination (Chandler et al., 2011). Additionally, though obtaining licensure signals that they have met the highest level of qualification for their profession (Mester et al., 2009), licensure is a time-consuming process that involves completing a master's degree program, passing the national licensing exam, and undergoing a 2-year supervision under an LPC supervisor (Field et al., 2018).

Further, many South Carolina state agencies such as SCDSS, SCDMH, and SCDJJ are able to hire non-licensed master's level staff to fulfill positions of a licensed counselor, with the added expense of securing a contractual licensed counselor to provide an approval signature. However, managed care, third-party reimbursement, counselor licensure, and the privatization of the public mental health and substance abuse agencies in this South Carolina have led to more counselors seeking credentials (Chapin &

Goodwin, 2006). South Carolina has mandated that if third-party reimbursement through a private provider is expected, the person must be fully licensed and credentialed for the agency to receive reimbursement (SCDHHS, 2018). This means that employers do not offer the position of a counselor to graduates who have not obtained their professional license or secure a licensed professional to provide a signature of approval for every billable service. This creates a complex market in South Carolina for both employer and potential employee (SCDHHS, 2018). It also points to the need for better understanding of why some master's level counseling students choose licensure while others do not (SCDHHS, 2018). Though research has indicated the knowledge and skills required for graduates to find employment as well as the training process (Choudhuri & Ametrano, 2008; Landrum & Harrold, 2003; Miller et al., 2015), little is known about the decision-making process that master's level counseling graduates undergo as they decide whether to pursue licensure. Research is needed to understand the factors that influence the career decision making and self-efficacy of master's level graduates seeking employment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, comparative case study was to describe the experiences of counseling students transitioning to professionals in South Carolina by exploring why some counseling graduates choose to pursue licensure and others do not as well as the implications for employment. I focused on two groups: non-licensed counselors versus licensed counselors and their knowledge, skills, and abilities to work as mental health professionals. I also examined the licensure requirements in South Carolina with the aim of understanding the decision-making process that each individual elected.

Research Questions

The central research question address by this study was: "What experience, knowledge, skills, and abilities separate master's level counselors who pursue licensure in South Carolina from master's level counselors who did not pursue licensure as they seek employment?" The following sub research questions were used to explore the understanding in career decision making to becoming an LPC:

1. Describe what led you to pursuing a graduate degree in counseling.
2. How did you choose the university to attend for this major?
3. Describe your experience during your graduate practicum/internship.
4. What is your understanding of the licensure process to becoming an LPC?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The theoretical framework for this study was based on Bandura's (1986) social cognitive career theory (SCCT) and Krumboltz's (1979) social learning theory of career decision making (SLTCDM). Each of these theories are briefly described in relation to the current study in this section. A more detailed discussion of the theoretical framework is presented in Chapter 2.

Social Cognitive Career Theory

Bandura's (1986) SCCT is based on self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals (Lent et al., 1994). Self-efficacy refers to the beliefs people have about their ability to successfully complete the steps required for a given task. Individuals develop their sense of self-efficacy from personal performance, learning by example, social interactions, and how they feel in situations. Outcome expectations are the beliefs related

to the consequences of performing specific behaviors. Typically, outcome expectations are formed through past experiences, either direct or vicarious, and the perceived results of these experiences. Finally, goals are individuals' decisions to begin activities to achieve future plans. Goal-related behaviors are organized or sustained based on an individual's previously set goals (Lent et al., 1994).

Based on SCCT, career interests are regulated by self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Conklin et al., 2013). Individuals often develop lasting interests when they experience personal competency and positive outcomes related to these interests, whereas a belief of low personal competency may lead activity avoidance (Afsar & Masood, 2017). Perceived barriers related to gender, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, or family constraints may create negative outcome expectations, even when people have had previous success in the given area (Polat & Özdemir, 2020), such as a master's degree program.

The SCCT can be used to analyzes career-related interest, choice, and performance, while focusing on vocational interests (Lent et al., 2009). The SCCT helps examine decision-making skills, causes, and affects that determine an individual's career decisions. The theory can be used to develop an understanding of individuals' career goals by shedding light on how career and academic interests mature, how career choices are developed, and how these choices are turned into action. Using the three tenets of the SCCT, the current study addressed how participants' self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and career/education goals influenced their counseling licensure decisions.

Social Learning Theory for Career Decision Making

Krumboltz (1979) expanded on the three tenets of SCCT outlined by Bandura (1986) to develop the SLTCDM. Though SCCT focuses on individuals' self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goals, the SLTCDM considers how genetics, environmental factors, educational experiences, cognitive responses, and performance skills interact to move individuals down their career paths (Krumboltz et al., 1976). Individuals' educational and social experiences significantly influence the development of their preferences and cognitive performance skills (Monteil & Huguet, 1999; Schneeweis et al., 2014). In this way, an individual's learning experience impacts the likelihood they would have similar future ones. For example, if a student excels in a class or performs well on a project, the likelihood of that student pursuing similar activities may increase due to positive feedback from those successful experiences. Thus, changes in learning experiences can result in changes to individuals' educational goals or occupational preferences (Billett, 2011). In context of the study, the SLTCDM was employed to explore how participants' predispositions, environments, educational experiences, cognitive and emotional responses, and performance skills influence their licensure decisions.

Together, the SCCT (Bandura, 1986) and the SLTCDM (Krumboltz et al., 1976) provide a rich framework for investigating factors that may influence the licensure decisions made by master's level counselors. The factors covered in the SCCT (self-efficacy, outcome expectations and goals) and the SCTCDM (genetics, environmental factors, educational experiences, cognitive responses, and performance skill) were used

to develop the interview protocol, examine existing research, and discuss study findings. Because a license offers many benefits to master's level counselors, including higher wages, legal recognition, and the ability to receive reimbursements from third-party payers, it is important to understand why some individuals choose to pursue licensure and others do not. Using this theoretical framework, I was able to explore several potential factors. Findings may reduce barriers to licensure or encouraging professionals to pursue licensure.

Nature of the Study

This study followed a qualitative, comparative case study design to investigate how experiences of master's level counseling graduates who pursue licensure in South Carolina compare with master's level counseling graduates who did not pursue licensure. I sought to understand why some choose to become licensed and other do not to gain a greater understanding of non-licensed professional's career decision making process versus the licensed professionals who completed the final step of the academic process. Thus, I examined two cases to understand their similarities and differences: (a) non-licensed master's level clinicians and (b) licensed master's level clinicians. All participants were professionals who were actively practicing counseling in South Carolina. Using purposeful sampling, a total of six participants consisting of four licensed and two non-licensed counselors were selected and interviewed. Participants were recruited online, via professional counseling websites or through professional relationships established over the years. All participants were screened to ensure they had

the minimum educational requirements. Data were collected via semistructured interviews and analyzed via thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Definitions

Approved supervisor: A licensee who has met the requirements for approval as a professional counselor supervisor or marriage and family therapy supervisor, as provided in regulation (South Carolina Legislature, 2012).

License: An authorization to practice counseling or marriage and family therapy issued by the board pursuant to this article and includes an authorization to practice as a professional counselor intern or marriage and family therapy intern (South Carolina Legislature, 2012).

Licensee: An individual who has met the requirements for licensure under this article and has been issued a license to practice as a professional counselor or professional counselor intern or a marriage and family therapist or marriage and family therapy intern (South Carolina Legislature, 2012).

Licensed professional counselor (LPC): An individual who practices professional counseling (South Carolina Legislature, 2012).

Self-efficacy: The belief or confidence people have in their ability to achieve their goals (Rubin et al., 1993).

Assumptions

I assumed that participants would feel comfortable in discussing their feelings, perceptions, and understandings of the current study. I made every effort to (a) keep questions clear and concise, capable for graduate level pre- and post-graduates to

comprehend, and (b) I respected all opinions and answers and provided confidentiality and opportunities to share relevant information. Additionally, I offered more information about how to become licensed in South Carolina with care to not sound judgmental of the decisions that were already made by the participants. Additionally, participants had the opportunity to learn more about the South Carolina licensure process that may have not been evident to them before the interview.

Limitations

One limitation of this qualitative study stemmed from the inductive process that underlies qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research focuses on understanding a phenomenon but interpreting other people's thoughts and processes can be difficult, but limitations may arise when feelings are involved (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Personal feelings could influence the outcome to present the results based on a preconceived notion. Data collection in qualitative research is dependent on the researcher; thus, I intentionally refrained from projecting bias onto the data during the data collection process. Bracketing was employed to help prevent my personal ideas and biases from influencing data collection or analysis. A reflexive journal helped with bracketing and mitigating bias.

A second limitation was finding a sufficient number of recent graduates or counseling interns that fall into the two groups: those who have chosen to become licensed and those who have chosen the non-licensed professional path. Time was limited to recruit eligible participants. But the researcher has to decide how much to generalize or how much to leave for the readers to interpret (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

A third limitation involved reliability, validity, and generalization (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because biases exist, the reliability and lack of representation on case study analysis may pose a problem. Case studies have shown that they lack reliability because of subjectivity; it is important that no presumptions are made that influence valid data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The current study may have been biased due to the belief that master's level individuals should become licensed. However, I intentionally avoided predicting study outcomes based on my experiences.

Scope and Delimitations

A qualitative case study design can be a daunting task for a novice researcher; however, if the researcher can tell the story in a chronological order as the phenomenon unfolds it should relate to the propositions and address the research question (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Further, studying atypical cases help to understand human experiences (Abramson, 1992), such as interviewing master's level staff who did not pursue licensure after completing a program that offers a license. The purpose of this qualitative, comparative case study was to describe the experiences of master's level licensed professions and non-licensed master's level professionals as they sought employment in South Carolina. The study did not seek to judge decisions of graduates/professionals but to gain a better understanding of why they chose the path they chose and to measure their level of career preparation in mental health.

Significance of the Study

This study was important to understanding the driving factors behind licensed and non-licensed counselors as they prepare for the workforce. Having a better understanding

of why some master's level counseling graduates do not pursue licensure and the self-actualization of counseling graduates may shed light on the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to work in a clinical setting and to also understand what employers need. Due to the lack of licensed professional counselors in South Carolina versus surrounding states, this research addressed the rationale for seeking licensure, which may help address a need for more licensed professionals. Other human resource professionals who seek to recruit, hire, and credential these professionals should have a better understanding of the two.

This study also shed light on participants' career strategies and factors that affected their career decision-making, clarifying how the credentialing process is viewed in South Carolina for a licensed professional versus a non-licensed professional. The third-party reimbursement insurance companies play a major role in helping employers finding the right candidates for the jobs. When an employer sends in the credentialing application, the insurance company requests a copy of the applicant's licensure, proof of malpractice insurance, and their National Provider Identifier number.

Summary and Transition

Programs under the SCDHHS and other state agencies allow master's level human service professionals to provide counseling services that are the same as those provided by LPCs. The purpose of this qualitative comparative case study was to describe the experiences of counseling students in transition to becoming professionals in South Carolina regarding their decision to pursue licensure. The goal was to explore why some

counseling students choose to pursue licensure while others did not, and the effects this decision had on their obtaining positions in mental health agencies.

Chapter 2 presents the history and systems of becoming a licensed professional, the benefits of licensure, and licensure requirements in South Carolina. The research gathered describes pertinent information on career decision-making strategies as well as self-actualization beliefs as graduates' transition to become professionals. Details of the study's method, design, data collection, and analysis procedures are presented in Chapter 3. Results of the analysis appear in Chapter 4, and a discussion of findings is provided in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Licensure has many benefits to master's level counselors, including higher wages, legal recognition, and third-party reimbursements (CACREP, 2013). Despite these benefits, many professional counselors do not pursue licensure. For instance, in South Carolina, graduates of a master's level counseling program are not required to obtain licensure to provide counseling services. Thus, the purpose of the study was to describe the experiences of counseling graduates in transition to becoming professionals in South Carolina by exploring why some counseling graduates choose to pursue licensure while others did not. Specifically, I explored the experiences, knowledge, skills, and abilities that separate participants who pursue licensure from those who do not.

This literature review provides background information on the process and procedures required to become an LPC in South Carolina as well as the skills necessary to function in that role. The chapter also provides information regarding self-efficacy theories and their relationship to career self-efficacy. The chapter also includes a discussion of the licensure rates and credentialing procedures in neighboring states such as North Carolina and Georgia. To better understand the history and systems of the licensure process, the literature review includes an exploration of the LPC foundations and credentialing structures stipulated by the American Psychological Association (APA), the accrediting body involved with the licensure and supervision of practicum students.

Literature Search Strategy

Literature for this review was located through comprehensive online search methods. A librarian was enlisted to help generate a list of search terms, which included *counselors in transition to licensure, counselors in training,* and *graduate counselor's supervision*. Among the journal databases searched, those that generated the most applicable results were SAGE Journals, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, Wiley Online Library, and the Elsevier. Prior to conducting the searches, the *peer-reviewed* option was selected to ensure all generated literature fit this designation.

Current literature containing empirical research relevant to the current study was reviewed. Included research appeared in a wide range of publications, such as *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, Journal of Counseling & Development, Journal of Vocational Behavior, Development Quarterly, Journal of Career Development, Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *The Clinical Supervisor, Primary Care Mental Health*, *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, *Counselor Education and Supervision*, and *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology.* The Google Scholar search engine was also used to identify additional relevant articles in peer-reviewed journals. Once the key authors in this area of research were identified (e.g., Lavie, Baddeley, Sueller, Colom, and Engle), the corpus of their works were reviewed for relevant research. Similarly, identified journals were reviewed, especially in themed issues for other relevant work.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the current research was founded on the following relevant theories: SCCT (Lent et al., 1994) and SLTCDM (Krumboltz et al., 1976). Through these cognitive theories, emphasis is placed on how people understand their own career paths and behaviors. The SCCT and SLTCDM were used to explore how career and academic interests mature, how career choices are developed, and how these choices are turned into actions. Career adaptability or learned behaviors can influence a person's cognition, which affects decisions regarding academic pursuits and career paths (Lent et al., 1994). These theories are contextually discussed in the following sections.

Social Cognitive Career Theory

The SCCT stems from Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory and explores how career and academic interests mature, how career choices are developed, and how these choices evolve into actions. The SCCT focuses on three primary tenets: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals (Lent et al., 1994). Self-efficacy refers to an individual's judgment of his or her ability to develop and implement a course of action to acquire a particular type of self-performance (Bandura, 1986; Hall, 2003; Hackett & Lent, 1987). According to Bandura (1986), self-efficacy describes the belief in the capacity to perform assigned duties or tasks. For example, someone who excels in a high school psychology course may believe they should major in psychology in college. This example of self-efficacy, referred to as *academic self-efficacy revelation*, can turn into career self-efficacy (Lent, 1994).

Further, many researchers have described SCCT as a way of establishing career goals or intentions, as desire to reach expected outcomes drives individuals to their chosen career paths. These goals are affected by an individual's self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations (Gainor & Lent, 1998). SCCT stems from Bandura's social cognitive theory and explores how career and academic interests mature, how career choices are developed, and how these choices evolve into actions (1986). SCCT focuses on three primary tenets: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals (Lent et al., 1994). In the past, researchers described SCCT as the way one establishes career goals or intentions. In this way, SCCT suggests that the mere desire to reach an expected outcome drives an individual toward a chosen career path. However, self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectation have direct effects on goal selection, and it is possible goals are influenced by self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations (Gainor & Lent, 1998). Missing from the literature, however, is an in-depth understanding of factors that affect counselors' self-efficacy and further pursuit of licensure for career completion.

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's judgment of his or her ability to develop and implement a course of action in order to acquire a particular type of self-performance (Bandura, 1986; Hall, 2003; Hackett & Lent, 1987). According to Bandura (1986), self-efficacy describes one's belief in his or her capacity to perform assigned duties or tasks. For example, one who excels in a high school psychology course may believe he or she should major in psychology in college. This example of self-efficacy, referred to as *academic self-efficacy revelation*, can turn into career self-efficacy (Lent, 1994).

Social Learning Theory for Career Decision Making

The second theory of the theoretical framework comes from Krumboltz's (1976) SCLCDM, which stems from the three concepts outlined in SCCT: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goals. It can be used to help explain "how educational and occupational preferences and skills are acquired and how selections of courses, occupations, and fields of work are made" (Krumboltz et al., 1976, p. 71). Though the SCCT focuses on individuals' self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goals, SLTCDM considers how genetics, environmental factors, educational experiences, cognitive and emotional responses, and performance skills interact to move individuals down career paths (Krumboltz et al., 1976).

According to Krumboltz (1976), four types of factors can influence an individual's career decisions, including: (a) genetic endowments and special abilities, (b) environmental conditions and events, (c) learning experiences, and (d) task approach (Lent et al., 2002). Genetic endowments refer to the inherited traits and qualities that an individual is born with, such as race, sex, physical appearance, and handicaps. These factors may also include abilities attributed to genetic predispositions, such as intelligence, musical and artistic abilities, and muscular coordination (Arthur & McMahon, 2019).

Environmental conditions and events describe factors outside of an individual's control, including social, political, economic, or cultural factors (Krumboltz et al., 1976). Such environmental factors can influence an individual's career preferences, skills, plans, and activities. Krumboltz explained that many environmental conditions can affect career

decisions, including (a) number and nature of job opportunities, (b) number and nature of training opportunities, (c) social policies and procedures for selecting trainees and workers, (d) rate of return for various occupations, (e) labor and union laws and rules, (f) natural disasters, (g) resource availability and demand, (h) advances in technology, (i) changes in social organizations, (j) family training experiences and resources, (k) educational systems, and (l) neighborhood and community influences (Krumboltz et al., 1976, p. 72).

Further, learning experiences describe educational and occupational decisions, which are often influenced by past learning experiences (Krumboltz et al., 1976). These experiences can include instrumental and associative learning experiences. Finally, task approach describes the skills that one uses to approach problem solving including cognitive processes, emotional responses, and mental sets.

In addition to genetic, environmental, learning, and task approach factors, the SLTCDM also posits that career decisions are affected by individuals' experiences with rewards and punishments (Vondracek et al., 2019). Taken together, career decisions can be explored along a continuum from birth through adulthood. At birth, people are presented with genetic factors and predispositions that may affect their orientations toward, or interest in, certain career choices (Lent et al., 2002). As people mature, they are inevitably affected by environmental, economic, social, and cultural factors and experiences. These factors and experiences can affect individuals' learning experiences, which mold their preferences and cognitive performance skills. In this way, the consequences of an individual's learning experiences affect the likelihood that have

similar ones in the future such as success or positive feedback (Krumboltz, 1976). Krumboltz (1976) explained, "A successful performance or positive feedback from other people increases the probability that certain types of activities will be repeated and therefore that certain types of skills will be developed to a greater extent" (p. 75). In this way, changes in learning experiences can result in changes to individuals' educational goals or occupational preferences. Combined, the SLTCDM and SCCT provide a valuable framework for exploring licensure decisions made by master's level counselors in South Carolina.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Counseling Education

Master's level education in counseling has been the target of much criticism over the years including a lack of standards and diminished reputation (Kurpius et al., 2015; McPherson et al., 2000). According to the Society of Counseling Psychology, a taskforce created to examine master's level counseling programs, there are three main problems associated with insufficient monitoring these programs: (a) inadequately serving graduates, (b) the inability to enforce training standards, and (c) providing opportunities for other professional groups to step in and offer counseling services in a competitive market (Douce et al., 2001).

Since 1981, the CACREP (2013) has worked to accredit master's level counseling programs and establish state laws for counseling licensure. As of April 2015, there were 621 CACREP-accredited master's programs in the United States, including 247 school counseling programs, 207 mental health/clinical mental health counseling programs, 79

community counseling programs, 42 marriage/family counseling programs, and 32 college/student affairs programs (Kurpius et al., 2015). Although graduation from a CACREP-accredited program may not be required for licensure, some states have added language to legislature that mandates graduation from a CACREP-accredited program, or one that is equivalent. However, this can lead to nonaccredited programs using language that indicates they may be equivalent when they are not to the same standards as those accredited by the CACREP (Urofsky, 2013). Thus, there is still doubt regarding the merit of accreditation being associated to quality education.

Counseling Licensure and Credentialing

To conceptualize the decisions that individuals make regarding counseling licensure, it is important to discuss factors that may influence such decisions. This section contains an analysis of the historical background of the credentialing processes for counselors in the United States, including a brief overview of policy and state-by-state differences in credentialing. A discussion of licensure requirements in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia is presented to illustrate how licensure requirements can vary significantly by state. This comparison also helps frame the challenges that the lack of universal licensure requirements can create for an individual who wish to practice in states other than the one in which he or she obtained licensure. Finally, the section closes with a discussion of the benefits of licensure.

Historical Background

It is important that individuals earn the qualification of licensed professional counselors before providing services, and there are different requirements for licensure,

depending on the law of a particular region. All 50 U.S. states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia currently recognize professional counselors through state licensure (Kurpius et al., 2015). Each state legislates licensing practices and procedures of counseling professionals working within that state (Wilkinson & Suh, 2013). Individual state licenses are in accord with the 10th amendment because counseling is considered a form of health care, which also makes it a form of commerce (Wilkinson & Suh, 2013). Thus, states are given individual control over licensing requirements for counselors. Because every state has its own licensing laws, disparities in professional practices and standards have developed (ACA, 2020). For example, states disagree on many licensure requirements, including the number of clinical and supervisory hours required, educational requirements, examination, and credential titles (Wilkinson & Suh, 2013). According to the ACA (2020), professional counselors are currently identified by six different titles. These disparities make the process of licensure a confusing pursuit for students and graduates of counseling programs (Wilkinson & Suh, 2013).

Despite the complexity of the licensure process, thousands of graduates from master's level counseling programs earn professional counseling licenses each year (Kurpius et al., 2015). There are various professional counselors across the country who work under licensure laws within the state (Elliott et al., 2019), and it is important to understand the education and training standards for gaining a license that are on par with master's level health services. The licensure requirement for professional counselors includes the possession of a counseling-related master's level degree earned within the nation and are board-accredited (SCDHHS, 2018). That degree must be earned at an

accredited institution and include coursework on topics such as human development and effective counseling strategies. Students must also complete a minimum 3,000 hours of experience in a clinical field per South Carolina licensure board (SCDHHS, 2018). Once licensed, a professional counselor must adhere to the strict ethical codes and recognized standards of clinical practices, which are regulated by the licensure boards of each respective state.

The practice of licensed professional counselors includes treating mental and emotional disorders, addictive disorders, and educating families, groups, and organizations about mental health (Tarvydas & Hartley, 2018). The education and training of counselors encourages the adoption of client- and illness-centered therapies for the betterment of individuals and groups as a whole (Truax & Carkhuff, 2017). Licensed professional counselors provide face-to-face contact with individuals, families or groups concerning their mental health and psychological treatments. LPCs provide diagnosis and treatment services for mental disorders and the reduction of depression (Fulton et al., 2019). LPCs can be helpful for individuals suffering with mental problems and emotional disorders.

In South Carolina, licensed professional counselors are required to have a master's degree (SCLLR, 2020). At minimum, they must possess an undergraduate degree in psychology, which includes studies in human development, foundations of behavior, and the assessment and evaluation of mental health (SCLLR, 2020). Degree programs are available for a variety of mental health specializations, and it is important for students to learn the counseling skills they need to practice in their chosen areas of

expertise (Hodges, 2012). Master's degree programs are specific to the therapies of counseling, including techniques, models of research, and statistics within clinical fields. Individuals are required to gain clinical field experience under supervision and in compliance with state requirements (South Carolina Labor and Licensure Board [SCLLB], n.d.). Licensing information and certifications relate to the standards of counseling professions and regulations within a chosen area of expertise (Field et al., 2018). The most common state requirement to become an LPC after earning a master's degree involves obtaining a passing score on the licensing exam, gaining professional experience under the supervision of a LPC supervisor and complying with a state's continuing education standards (SCLLB, n.d). Some states require certification for specific areas of mental health, and these specialized certifications come with continuing education requirements.

The identification of a licensed counselor distinguishes those in compliance with South Carolina's licensure requirements from those who are not. Licenses and advanced credentials are provided by accredited, state-recognized institutions, and prohibit unlawful practice of those who do not meet state standards (ACA, 2014). Government and state laws that require licensure or credentials are designed to protect the health and safety of all citizens (Hodges, 2021). Generally, serious violations are sanctioned with fines, revocation of licenses, or imprisonment (ACA, 2014), which may be a major motivational factor to further pursue career advancement in the counseling field.

Licensure Requirements

In 1967, the APA Committee on Legislation proposed restrictions on the provision of counseling services. In 1973, the Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision established the first counselor licensure committee. As states started to take the licensure process as serious as other credentials, they began adopting more laws to sanction the process. In 1975, Virginia passed the first regulatory act for professional counselors (revised in 1976 to license counselors). Less than 20 years later, 41 states and the District of Columbia had adopted counselor licensure laws.

Regardless of the path to licensure that an individual chooses, mental health counselors and psychologists have overlapping duties with varied distinctions in training and scope of practice (Okech et al., 2019). Obtaining a license after graduating from a counseling degree program separates the master's level graduate from the licensed professional counselor (Hodges, 2021). Each state requires counseling students to be licensed to practice as an LPC (APA, 2020). The National Board for Certified Counselors and Affiliates (NBCC), an independent, not-for-profit credentialing board, was established 1982 to create and maintain a national certification system to enable the identification of individuals who sought certification and to maintain a registry of counselors (NBCC, 2017).

NBCC's certification program recognizes counselors who have met predetermined standards in their training, experience, and performance on the National Counselor Examination for Licensure and Certification (NCE) or National Mental Health Clinical Examination (NMHCE). These counselors live and work in the U.S. and in more

than 40 countries (NBCC, 2017). The examinations are used by all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico to credential counselors on state and territory levels (NBCC, 2017). Although these examinations are used in countries around the world, each country, and each state within the United States, has its own certification requirements that mandate required courses for a master's level education (NBCC, 2017).

To become a licensed counselor in South Carolina, a candidate must have a master's degree in a related field and pass the certification exam (Field et al., 2018). Once a passing score has been obtained, the candidate must complete a 2-year, supervised internship (Counselor-License, 2020). The requirements of the LPC and Psychologist are similar in the respect that applicants must have supervised training and prior approval to apply to and sit for the actual testing. However, a major difference between the two degrees is that an individual who wants to work as a *psychologist* must complete the academic requirements at a doctoral level, whereas counseling is at a master level (Kuther & Morgan, 2019). Individuals should determine how much education they want to pursue when deciding which career path is best for them (Hodges, 2012).

The South Carolina Code of Regulations administered by the Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation (DLLR) requires that the doctoral degree meet the standards set forth by the American Association of State Psychology Boards or be accredited by a nationally recognized agency (SCLLR, 2020). Therefore, in order to become a licensed psychologist in the State of South Carolina, one must first hold a terminal degree in the field (SCLLR, 202020). Most candidates for licensure as a psychologist in South Carolina take the Examination for Professional Practice of

Psychology during their fellowship year (SCLLR, 202020). In order to sit for the exam, candidates must obtain the prior approval of the State Licensing Board (SCLLR, 2020). Only after approval to sit for the examination does the South Carolina The DLLR sends out the materials to register for the test (SCLLR, 2020). Next, candidates must take and pass the exam with a minimum score of 70% (SCLLR, 2020). Lastly, South Carolina requires candidates for licensure as a psychologist to pass an oral examination administered by a designated member of the South Carolina Board of Examiners in Psychology (SCLLR, 2020).

There are two different exams students can take to become an LPC in South Carolina: the NCE and the NMHCE. The NCE is used for two purposes: national counselor certification and state counselor licensure (Hodges, 2021). The purpose of both licenses is to assess knowledge, skills, and abilities viewed as important for providing effective counseling services. Many professionals argue that this imposed system does not accurately delineate those who are in a better career fit, but the purpose of the examination is designed to determine those who possess the skills and knowledge to take on the responsibilities of a professional counselor (Weinrach & Thomas, 1993). Rather, the exam is intended to assess cognitive knowledge that should be known by all counselors, regardless of their individual professional specialties (NBCC, 2017).

The NMHCE on the other hand, includes 10 case studies with 10 questions for each case in which the master's level counselor must have a clear understanding regarding the well-being of clients and be able to make clinical decisions based upon the information gathered from clients. There are two sections of the exam: information

gathering (IG) and decision making (DM). In the IG section, the student is expected to gather all relevant information for answering the questions while remaining mindful of the client's well-being. The IG section might include family background, status of physical health, and previous experience in counseling. The DM sections provide opportunities for making clinical judgments or decisions. It should be noted that each question can have more than one answer (NBCC, 2017). The advantage of taking the NMHCE is that it is approved by Tricare, whereas the NCE is not. Thus, the NMHCE can lead to many benefits when it comes to working with military personnel and their families (NBCC, 2017)**.** Unlike the NMHCE, the NCE test format includes 200 multiple questions, including topics in the following sections: Human growth and development, social and cultural foundations, helping relationships, group work, career and lifestyle development, appraisal, research and program evaluation, and professional orientation and ethics.

State Requirements

Each state is different in terms of which classes must be taken in order to sit for the state licensing exam. In the State of South Carolina, there are two phases to becoming a licensed counselor (Counselor-License, 2020). The first stage is obtaining the education necessary to sit for the licensure examination (Counselor-License, 2020). The courses students must take and pass to be eligible for licensure examination include human growth and development, social and cultural foundations; the helping relationship; group dynamics, processing, and counseling; lifestyle and career development: appraisal of individuals; research and evaluation; professional orientation; psychopathology; and

diagnostics of psychopathology. In addition to passing required courses, each student must complete 150 hours of supervised counseling practicum (indirect and direct hours) and 600 hours of supervised counseling internship (indirect and direct hours). Once the student has successfully passed all classes, completed a practicum and a full 600 hours of supervised internship, the student may sit for the South Carolina LPC exam. Only after passing the examination can the student be promoted to the second phase, which consists of a two-year internship (Counselor-License, 2020).

During the two-year internship, the student must be under documented supervision for 1500 hours —1350 of which must involve direct client contact (Counselor-License, 2020). Additionally, an applicant must obtain 150 hours of direct supervision by a professional counselor that meets South Carolina's supervision standards (Counselor-License, 2020). Even after being supervised by a professional counselor, at least 100 of the supervision hours must be for individual therapy (Counselor-License, 2020). During supervised sessions, the candidate shares information about their individual clients and the treatment being provided (Counselor-License, 2020). The supervisor may also make observations and conduct co-therapy sessions (Counselor-License, 2020). In the state of South Carolina, the board-approved clinical supervisor needs to be a professional counselor, whereas the on-site supervisor does not have to be (Counselor-License, 2020).

To hold a license from a particular state in counseling, or to be recognized as a licensed professional in that state, one must be granted permission to practice by complying with that state's professional requirements (NBCC, 2017). Because

requirements vary from state-to-state, it can be difficult to obtain positions across state lines. For example, in South Carolina, counselors from the neighboring states of North Carolina and Georgia may be surprised to discover that professional requirements for master's level counselors vary. The different requirements are discussed below.

Licensure Benefits

There are many benefits to licensure for counseling professionals, including professional credibility and improved awareness of legal and ethical issues related to counseling (Elliott et al., 2019). Benefits of licensure also include the following: (a) protecting the public from incompetent providers (b) allowing counselors to receive insurance reimbursement; (c) encouraging greater professional competence among counselors; (d) providing professional power and prestige; increasing counselors' abilities to qualify for employment; and (f) giving the profession credibility in the face of criticisms of mental health services (Mascari & Webber, 2013). Satisfactory performance on the NCE is part of the criteria used by NBCC to identify professionals who may be eligible to become National Certified Counselors (NCC; Hodges, 2021).

The purpose of licensure is to require professionals to abide by standards and laws (Watson & Schmit, 2020). To obtain a license, a counselor must pledge to follow a code of restrictions and ethics that anyone without a license is not bound to follow. A non-licensed counselor is typically not qualified for malpractice insurance coverage and may be subject to a malpractice lawsuit for imposing mental or emotional harm as opposed to the licensed counselor (Wheeler & Bertram, 2015). Although it is often interchangeable, psychology and counseling provide different forms of assistance (Metz, 2016). Most

psychologists have training at the doctoral level. Some specialties, like occupational industrial psychology, require less training. However, it takes a doctoral degree to sit down and work one-on-one with clients as a clinical or counseling psychologist. A doctoral degree in psychology or a closely related field is required to become a psychologist in South Carolina (DLLR, 2014).

Counseling Supervision

Clinical supervision is a required and essential component for preparing professional counselors to become ethical and obtain competency to handle difficult client consultations (Aasheim, 2012). Literature on clinical supervision notes that instructors use a variety of perspectives, theories, and teaching styles (Fernardo & Hulse-Killacky, 2005) that can potentially pose challenges to the learning environment. In 2010, Champe and Koltz performed a phenomenological case study to explore the transition of mental health counseling interns from students to professionals. The authors explained that as interns advanced into their last semesters of school, they are often confronted with the challenge of forming their professional identities. Counselor education researchers contended that becoming a professional counselor is a complex, developmental process that is not yet fully understood (Auxier et al., 2003; Borders, 1989; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 1992, 2003). The developmental changes that occur during this transitional stage are described as counselor identity development.

Hazler and Kottler (2005) viewed the transition from student to professional counselor as a time when several changes take place. According to this research, candidates must account for geographic areas, the population to be served, and make the

decision between government positions or private practice. The authors noted that this transition can cause grief or stress for the student in becoming a professional by evaluating income and their abilities to have autonomy in the new workplace rather than looking for others' recommendations and approval (Koltz & Champe, 2010, p. 2).

Gazzola et al. (2011) performed a qualitative case study with 10 counseling psychology doctoral students on professional identity. The researchers wanted to take a closer look at the perception doctoral students had on what caused them to be identified professionally. Hansen (2007) stated that counseling psychology began with "humanistic values" (p. 257) that focus on how human beings should strive for growth and development. Gazzola et al. (2011) stated that although being a member of a professional organization helps to identify one as a professional, it does not justify who the individual really is and how he or she came to be a professional. Bruss and Kopala (1993) believed that both professional and personal identity could be one in the same. They believe that one's professional identity starts with their professional training or supervision this training and supervision could start while being an intern or new employee. The location or training environment could be an optimal place for graduates or new employees to identify whether a counseling profession is a good fit for them.

Career Factors

After completing a counseling education program, graduates who enter the professional community and begin pursuit of a counseling license often encounter various challenges (Wilkinson & Suh, 2013). For example, because educational programs are usually designed to comply with the licensing requirements of the state where the

program is located, students who decide to pursue licensure in states other than where they graduated may experience examination and licensure requirements they were not prepared for (Elliott et al., 2019). In response to the different challenges associated with obtaining licensure as a professional counselor, Wilkinson and Suh (2013) conducted a phenomenological investigation of the experiences of professional counselors in pursuit of licensure in the Southeast United States. Specifically, the researchers explored the shared experiences of professionals who were experiencing similar licensing requirements in the same state.

Participants included a purposive sample of six individuals in various stages of licensure (Wilkinson & Suh, 2013). The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews to investigate participants' experiences with licensure. Overall, the participants expressed feelings of frustration, discouragement, self-doubt, and helplessness, which varied in intensity throughout different stages of the process. The researchers reported that many participants' identities were consumed with licensure, and they connected it with their sense of self-worth and professional competence. Dealing with job searches and navigating convoluted licensing requirements created an emotional rollercoaster and heightened feelings of self-doubt among participants. Many participants felt that licensure requirements were unrealistic. Participants also expressed frustration with working in a field that was "financially prohibitive" (Wilkinson & Suh, 2013, p. 28) while having to pay for supervision, which also led them to question the financial viability of the career and ponder other career options. This finding was surprising, as the

researchers explained they expected to observe financial strain, but the effects of the strain on individuals' decisions to forego licensure or seek other careers were surprising.

Wilkinson and Suh's research is salient to the study, for it is quite possible that the frustrations expressed by study participants regarding confusing licensing requirements and the financial strain of working in a typically underpaid profession may be factors that lead individuals to forego licensure (Fullen et al., 2019). These factors were explored in the study as possible elements that separate licensed counselors in South Carolina from unlicensed counselors. Wilkinson and Suh suggested that licensure requirements should be evaluated for pragmatism and that current LPCs should offer support to their junior colleagues who are working on licensure.

Competence

During education and training, it is critical that counseling trainees develop professional competence. As Rust et al. (2013) explained, professional competence includes adequate understanding of ethical guidelines, and freedom from personal and interpersonal issues that could have a negative effect on professional counseling services. A lack of professional competence, referred to as problems of professional competence (PPC) or student impairment, includes shortcomings in ethics, competence, and/or personal functioning (Lamb & Swerdlik, 2003).

According to Gaubatz and Vera (2006), counselor educators estimate that around 10% of master's level counseling students demonstrated some form of PPC. Li et al. (2008) suggested 17 indicators of PPCs, which leaders of CACREP-accredited programs agreed with, including behaviors such as engaging in sexual contact with a client,

misrepresenting skill level, difficulties receiving supervision, inappropriate boundaries, and deficient interpersonal skills. According to Roach and Young (2007), many students experience skill, judgement, or personal functioning problems caused by the stress of graduate school and the shift to professional work while simultaneously managing other responsibilities. Students or professionals who demonstrate PPC may be assigned a variety of remediation strategies by program leaders, such as increased supervision, personal counseling, repeating a class, reducing clinical caseloads, or taking a leave of absence (Rust et al., 2013). Issues associated with PPC are relevant to the research because they may act as discouraging factors on students' paths to counseling licensure.

Identity

The reputation of master's level professional counselors is critical to gaining the confidence of third-party payers and Medicare. According to Spurgeon (2012), "counselors today are continually bombarded with questions about what they do and how they define themselves" (p. 4). The ACA adopted the following definition of professional counselors in 2008: "Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals" (Remley & Herlihy, 2010, p. 51). As Hawley and Calley (2009) explained, it is essential that professional counselors are recognized as a unified field of professionals in order for the profession to maintain a reputation of competence. Researchers have described how integral professional identity is to career success (e.g., Cashwell et al., 2009; Gibson et al., 2010). In addition, "professional counselors have been called upon to proactively, consistently, and comprehensively educate consumers

and policy makers about the benefits and uniqueness of counseling as a profession" (Reiner et al., 2013).

An individual's professional reputation begins with the development of his or her counselor identity, which is established by educators (Calley & Hawley, 2008). The establishment of a clear *counselor identity* among professional counselor is essential to establishing legitimacy (Reiner et al., 2013). Because other helping professionals also provide clients with counseling services, professional counselors must establish themselves as unique to other service providers that emphasize wellness, development, and prevention (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011). The lack of recognition of counselors has created professional challenges within the field, particularly when it comes to reimbursement from Medicare and insurance providers, which prevents clients from receiving counseling services (unless they are able to pay out-of-pocket), and opportunities for financial growth among professional counselors (Swanson, 2010).

In response to these problems associated with the establishment of a unified professional identity for LPCs, Reiner et al. (2013) conducted an empirical investigation of the counselor educators' perceptions of fragmentation in the field of counseling, and whether such fragmentation influenced licensure and third party reimbursements for professional counseling services. The researchers posited that counseling educators played an influential role in the establishment of counselors' identities and may provide helpful insight on professional identity and fragmentation in the field. Analysis revealed that participants perceived variations in licensure requirements across states were responsible for much of the fragmentation found in the field (Reiner et al., 2013). Some

respondents, especially those who taught mental health courses, perceived fragmentation in the field to have a significant impact on professional parity and portability. The majority of respondents believed that a unified professional identity would be of benefit to professional counselors. In terms of who they believed was responsible for establishing a unified identity, respondents indicated that professional counselors, the ACA, AASCB, and NBCC were most responsible for establishing license portability and recognition for reimbursement from third party providers. Results from Reiner et al. (2013) investigation may indicate additional factors in individuals' decisions regarding licensure. The challenges associated with the lack of a unified professional identity may discourage individuals from pursuing licenses.

In 2009, over 30 professional counseling associations came together in a professional conference, titled "20/20: A vision for the future of counseling" (Spurgeon, 2012, p. 4). The conference was thought of as an "avenue through which the counseling profession could articulate its understanding of its accomplishments and set a standard for future professional counselors" (Spurgeon, 2012, p. 4). Over a three-year period, representatives from the field met to discuss the future of the counseling profession and developed a list of seven critical principles to the field's growth and viability. These principles include: (a) creating a common professional identity for counselors, (b) presenting the profession as unified, (c) working to improve perceptions of counseling, (d) creating a system of licensure portability, (e) promoting research to improve counselor efficacy and public perceptions of the profession, (f) working with prospective students to ensure long-term viability of the profession, and (g) promoting client welfare

and advocating for vulnerable populations. The aforementioned principles developed during the 20/20 conference represent basic tenets required for growth of the field, as well as the professional growth of individual counselors (Spurgeon, 2012). The first four principles, especially, may be particularly relevant to licensure decisions made by individuals. These principles were integrated into the interview protocol for the study to allow me to explore how they may affect individual's decisions regarding licensure.

Preparation

Beyond the challenges posed by the lack of a unified professional identity, new master's level counselors face additional challenges related to career preparation. As Choudhuri and Ametrano (2008) explained, new counselors find themselves entering a field of immense competition and they are often unprepared with the necessary skills. The services of mental health counselors often overlap with those of other helping professionals, such as social workers. In fact, many job postings that require counseling training require candidates to have a master's degree in social work, rather than counseling (Choudhuri & Ametrano, 2008).

Many individuals who make hiring decisions to fill counseling positions hold MSWs themselves and tend to hire individuals with the same educational background (Altekruse et al., 2001). Such potential obstacles to employment for master's level counselors make it imperative for these individuals to act as their own professional advocates. As Choudhuri and Ametrano (2008) explained, they must learn how to seek out professional opportunities and compete with other mental service providers. To compete with other helping professionals for counseling positions, master's level

counselors have to be able to distinguish their services from others and communicate these differences – as well as the benefits of counseling with them over professionals in other fields – to legislators (Altekruse et al., 2001).

It is possible that employment challenges related to steep competition for a limited number of positions could affect an individual's decision regarding licensure. For example, with an understanding of the degree of competition, one may pursue licensure to themselves as competitive and marketable as possible (Blair & Chung, 2018). On the contrary, others may view the dismal employment conditions and decide that the long journey to licensure is not worth it (Spence, 1973).

Motivation

In addition to the aforementioned challenges that professional counselors may face with acquiring licenses, and problems with the profession in general (i.e., no unified professional identity, difficulty acquiring third party payments for services, etc.), an individual's career motivation may affect his or her licensure decisions. According to London (1983), career motivation is a dynamic construct that contains the following three career-related elements: resilience, insight, and identity. Resilience describes maintenance or persistence; identity describes the direction of motivation; and insight describes the energizing factors that prompt individuals to make career planning decisions (Alniacik et al., 2012).

All three resilience components are salient to the careers of professional counselors (Maree, 2017). For example, an individual who possesses career resilience can adapt to changing circumstances and unexpected events (Fourie & Van Vuuren, 1998),

such as adapting to licensure requirements in different states or navigating the murky road to licensure. One who possesses insight is excited and driven about the possibilities that licensure could afford him or her. A clear professional identity, which is associated with professional and organizational involvement, is linked to career motivation (Alniacik et al., 2012). This third factor could be particularly problematic for counselors, due to the issues associated with defining and creating a unifying identity for professional counselors, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Career motivation can also be affected by an individual's level of organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Alniacik et al., 2012). Counselors who possess high levels of organizational commitment may be motivated to perform better or obtain licensure in order to advance their careers within an organization. According to Mowday et al. (1982), organizational commitment consists of (a) a strong belief in, and acceptance of, the organization's goals and values; (b) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; and (c) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization.

Similar to organizational commitment, job satisfaction may affect career motivation (Alniacik et al., 2012). Locke (1976) defined job satisfaction as the positive emotional state that results from an individual's job or work experiences. According to Alniacik et al. (2012), individuals who like their jobs are more likely to invest more time in their own professional development and network with other professionals. Thus, individuals who are satisfied with their professions may be more apt to pursue

professional licenses and additional training in their fields because they are committed to their careers in the long term (Chen et al., 2010).

Boon et al. (2016) conducted a study to explore the differences between registered and non-registered counselors in Malaysia. Specifically, the researchers investigated how self-efficacy, job satisfaction, self-perceived employability, career success, and professional commitment were related to licensure status. The survey research involved 345 school counselors from 14 Malaysian states. Analysis of surveys revealed that individuals who were licensed demonstrated significantly higher self-efficacy scores than non-licensed counselors did. Licensed professionals also demonstrated higher levels of job satisfaction, self-perceived employability, career success, and professional commitment. Individuals who were not licensed indicated they decided against licensure because the process was too difficult or stressful. Findings from Boon et al. (2016) may be supported by factors uncovered in the study. Commitment, job satisfaction, and self-efficacy may be particularly influential factors in counselors' licensure decisions.

Summary and Transition

Because licensure in the State of South Carolina is strictly voluntary, many master's level counselors' practice without licenses. In South Carolina, counselors must be fully licensed to receive reimbursement through third-party payers (SCDHHS, 2018), which has created a complex employment situation for counselors and prospective employers. Little is known about why some counselors decide to pursue licensure, while others do not. Accordingly, the aim of this study was to explore why some counseling graduates choose to pursue licensure while others do not.

The literature provided a discussion of the history and relevance of counseling to conceptualize the study. It included a review of the routes to becoming a professional counselor, as well as the expectation outcomes and motivations that drive students. Various self-efficacy theories may play an important role in individual's licensure decisions. According to NBCC, "many professional counselors have found it rewarding and advantageous to hold national certification (the NCC) in addition to their academic degrees and, often, a state license" (NBCC, 2017, para. 1). Much of the research focuses on the importance of licensure, pathways to careers in counseling, and educational programs. Scholars have also discussed challenges with variations in licensure requirements across states. What remains unknown, however, is why some professionals forego licensure despite the potential professional benefits. The current study addressed this gap in the research.

The methodology for the study is provided in Chapter 3. Information provided includes the method, design, population, and sampling strategy. Procedures for data collection and analysis are also discussed. Study results appear in Chapter 4, followed by a discussion of findings in Chapter 5.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative, comparative case study was to explore why some counseling students in South Carolina chose to pursue licensure and others did not and the implications this has when preparing for employment. This study aimed to explore the process by which counseling professionals reached this occupational decision and the factors that influenced their respective choices. This chapter provides a detailed overview of the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, population and sampling, instrument development, data collection plan, and the method of data analysis.

Research Design and Rationale

The central research question guiding this current study was "What experiences, knowledge, skills, and abilities separate master's level counselors who pursue licensure in South Carolina from master's level counselors who do not pursue licensure as they seek employment?" I used a comparative case study to investigate the DM process that each participant used to decide to pursue or not pursue licensure, which was appropriate since the circumstances surrounding the phenomenon are not clear (Yin, 2003). Two groups were examined in this case study: (a) non-licensed master's level counselors and (b) licensed master's level counselors. However, the two cases have common interests: master's level clinicians who practice in South Carolina. This follows the approach of a comparative case study in examining two cases with conflicting circumstances (Yin, 2003).

Role of the Researcher

In this comparative case study, I explored master's level graduates from counseling programs who chose to pursue licensure versus those who did not through in-depth interviews. As the primary instrument of data collection in this study (Xu & Storr, 2012), I designed the interview protocol, interacted with participants in the context of the interviews, and identified the themes which emerge from the analysis of data. As such, I strived to minimize the influence of my own biases on the conduct of this study. Through bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2012), I endeavored to remain cognizant of my biases and actively set them aside to examine the data from a more objective stance.

I have 16 years of experience as a human resources director for private sectors of mental health as well as state agencies. Through my professional work, I have developed an advanced knowledge of interviewing skills, and as an experienced human resource professional I have years of experience conducting interviews with master's level counselors, both licensed and non-licensed. For qualitative inquiries, humans are the best instruments to collect the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I believe my experience facilitated the development of rapport in the interviewing and the collection of rich, detailed data.

Methodology

Sample Size

A purposeful sampling method was used to select participants for the study. Through purposeful sampling, a researcher can determine whom to interview, whom to observe, and what analyze (Miriam, 2014). Purposeful sampling or criterion-based

selection is appropriate when the researcher seeks to gain understanding about a phenomenon through participants who have experience or knowledge of that phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Research has suggested that 12 participants is an appropriate sample size for interview-based qualitative research (Guest et al., 2006). Based on this suggestion, a sample size of six was obtained, with four participants who were fully licensed professional counselors and two who were non-licensed. The goal in conducting the target number of interviews was to achieve saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Saturation refers to the point at which the researcher has collected enough data to fully explore the subject matter, and no novel ideas or themes result from additional data collection (Petty et al., 2012). Once saturation was reached for each group, no further interviews were conducted.

Participant Selection

My aim was to examine why some counseling professionals choose to pursue licensure and others do not. The two cases that were examined included (a) non-licensed master's level clinicians and (b) licensed master's level clinicians. All participants were professionals who were actively practicing counseling in South Carolina. These candidates were separated only by those who had completed the process for licensure as an LPC, and those who elected not to complete the process.

To qualify for the study, participants had to confirm that they had a conferred master's degree in counseling psychology from an accredited university or college. Those in the group of licensed professionals had to also present their state issued LPC

identification card, which confirms that an individual passed the required state examination and has completed all training and supervision requirements to receive licensure. Non-licensed participants only had to show that they held a conferred master's degree in counseling psychology or related field from an accredited university or college.

Participant Recruitment

Initial participant contact data were collected from the state licensure and examination website for 2014 for licensed professional counselors (see Appendix B). Data had to match with the state's licensure criteria for all participants. I then posted a recruitment flyer for the study on websites pertaining to the counseling profession. I sought permission from local counseling agencies, state boards, and practices throughout South Carolina to post the flyers to solicit interested individuals to be a part of the study. The flyer contained basic information about the study along with my contact information. Through a screening phone call, I spoke with the six prospective participants to confirm that they met the inclusion criteria for the study. I then selected the qualifying individuals as participants in the study.

Interview Setting

The study settings were private locations that were convenient to each participant. Interviews were conducted remotely over the phone and with video chat. Participation was completely voluntary, and participants did not have to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable. There were no notable organizational or social conditions that may have influenced participants' perspectives relative to the research questions.

Instrumentation

Data was collected via semi structured in-depth interviews (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The interview protocol was used to conduct interviews with each participant over the phone and with video chat. Comprised of open-ended questions, the interview protocol was developed based upon a review of the existing literature pertaining to the topic of study and a consideration of the research question (see Appendix A for the Interview Questions). To establish content validity for the newly created instrument (Gubrium, 2012), I obtained a panel of three subject matter experts (SMEs) to conduct a field test. To complete the field test, I asked the SMEs to evaluate the interview protocol to assess its clarity and relevance to the research question. Using their feedback, I revised the protocol to finalize the instrument.

There is abundant literature that supports the use of interviews for qualitative data collection (Hanson et al., 2011). Qu and Dumay (2011) held that interviews are among the most effective forms of qualitative data collection. The use of interviews enables the researcher to gather highly detailed information from participants, articulated in their own words (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Through use of an interview guide (Qu & Dumay, 2011), I ensured that the dialogue specifically addresses pertinent aspects of the phenomenon being studied, while also allowing participants to unreservedly reveal their experiences and share their perceptions.

Data Collection

In completing the interviews, I conducted telephone calls individually with each participant. The interviews were held in a mutually agreed upon private setting with the

participant. The interviews were conducted using the interview protocol and were expected to last approximately 60 minutes. I used an audio recorder to record the interviews, which enabled the documentation of the dialogue and facilitate accurate interview transcription. Prior to beginning the interview, I confirmed with each participant that they consented to audio recording of the interview. Once each interview was completed, I debriefed participants by answering any questions they had about the study. I provided my contact information for any future study-related inquiries. After completing transcriptions of the interviews, I utilized member checking to verify the accuracy of the transcripts. I emailed each participant a copy of the interview transcript to review for correctness. I reviewed the participants' suggestions for revisions and develop the finalized versions of the interview transcripts in preparation of the data for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis entails the examination of data to distinguish prominent patterns or trends throughout the dataset, which explain the phenomenon of study (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). I reviewed the interview transcripts to discover and identify recurring themes, ideas, and concepts. I then employed the process known as *coding* to capture the recurring themes and patterns of ideas and concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After I coded the data, the identified codes were merged to form broader themes and patterns. Codes were combined as patterns emerged in the data.

Thematic analysis was conducted using the steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006), including: 1) review transcripts carefully, 2) code transcripts, 3) compile codes

into themes, 4) examine themes against the research questions and framework, 5) define themes, and 6) produce a narrative of the results. Step 1 involved a careful review of all transcripts, which allowed me to become familiar with all data while beginning to identify repetition in the transcripts. Next, in Step 2 interview transcripts were coded. Repeated ideas, utterances, words, or phrases were assigned code names and placed throughout the transcripts, where the codes occurred. Each transcript was reviewed three times during the coding process to ensure no codes were missed. For Step 3, all codes were compiled into a single list and reviewed in context of the research questions and theoretical framework. For Step 4, themes were examined against the research question and framework to ensure alignment. Codes that did not align with the aim of the study were identified and discarded. In Step 5, the seven themes were then defined. For the final step of the analysis, the themes were compiled in a narrative of the results, presented in Chapter 4

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In evaluating the rigor or *trustworthiness* of a qualitative study, four key components are considered: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These four components can be enhanced through a variety of strategies. The processes by which I improved the trustworthiness are covered in the following paragraphs.

Credibility is the extent to which the findings of a study can be considered trustworthy, and accurately portray the phenomenon being investigated (Hanson et al., 2011). In this study, credibility was enhanced through data saturation, and member

checking. Saturation is the point at which all themes are fully explored, and no new themes emerge (Hanson et al., 2011). The achievement of saturation contributed to credibility by ensuring that the emergent themes have sufficient support within the dataset to be considered legitimate. Member checking via the review of transcripts contributed to credibility by ensuring the preliminary analysis accurately reflected the ideas and sentiments participants intended to convey.

Transferability describes the degree to which the findings can be transferred to other settings or populations (Hanson et al., 2011). The primary method by which the transferability was enhanced is through *thick description* (Petty et al., 2012). Thick description refers to highly detailed, rich accounts of the data that provide the context for an in-depth comprehension of the participants' perspectives. Dependability denotes the extent to which the research findings remain stable and could be replicated by another researcher with similar results (Petty et al., 2012). To enhance the dependability, I created an audit trail (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). An audit trail is a detailed description of the processes by which the researcher carried out the study and analyzed the data to obtain the research findings. By providing an audit trail, another researcher would be able to follow the methodological decisions made in the study and successfully replicate the study (Petty et al., 2012).

Finally, confirmability is a measure of the objectivity of the research findings (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). Essentially, findings with high confirmability are those which reflect the true perspectives of the participants, rather than the biases of the researcher. The confirmability of this study was improved by bracketing and reflexive journaling to

set aside my predetermined notions regarding the data, thereby limiting the potential of researcher bias (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Ethical Procedures

When conducting the interviews, it was important for me to abide by the ethical standards. According to ACA (2014) I ensured that the interview is appropriately used. Following Standard E.2.b Appropriate Use (ACA, 2014), I scored, interpreted, and used the data in an appropriate manner. I maintained cultural sensitivity and respected the beliefs and values of the interviewee (ACA, 2014, Standard E.5.b). By including a mixture of ethnicities, ages, and gender there was variance in the demographics within the study sample to enable the collection of a broad array of experiences and perspectives. In qualitative research, the selection of a sufficient sample size is crucial in ensuring that enough information is obtained to adequately explore the topic of study. A single method to examine this dispute is to confirm that data reaches a level of saturation, or the idea when no new evidence, discoveries, or understanding appears (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To protect participant confidentiality, the participant's identity was not disclosed in the publication of the study results, and their names were not stated verbally during the interview. I utilized an interview protocol to collect the data for the study. Individual confidentiality of all participants in the interview was honored, so that no harm is brought to the individual during the interview process (ACA, 2014). I informed the interviewees of their confidentiality by obtaining informed consent from each participant. The informed consent form contained information explaining the requirements of study

participation, any foreseen risks or benefits associated with participation, the protection of participant confidentiality, the intent to audio record the interviews, and a reminder that participation is strictly voluntary and that withdrawal from the study is permitted at any time. All data and study-related materials are maintained on a password-protected computer and in a locked filing cabinet. After three years, all study-related documents ae to be destroyed through deletion and commercial shredding.

Summary and Transition

The purpose of this qualitative comparative case study sought to describe the experiences of counseling students in transition to becoming professionals in South Carolina by exploring why some counseling students choose to pursue licensure while others did not. The two cases being examined are: licensed counselors and non-licensed counselors, both who practice as master's level clinicians in the State of South Carolina. Approximately six participants have been chosen comprised in this sample. I will collect data via semi structured face-to-face interviews. I used thematic analysis to analyze the collected data. The information enabled exploring how practitioners make the decision to pursue or forego licensure after graduating with a master's degree in the field of mental health counseling.

Chapter 4 presents the findings obtained from the analysis of the collected data. It begins with the setting for the participants, participants demographics, review of data analysis, and review of the themes analyzed. Three tables are introduced to format the emerging themes, and identified themes founded. The chapter concludes with the results

of the data analysis. Chapter 5 begins with the discussion, conclusion, and recommendation for this study.

Chapter 4: Results

The acceptance of non-licensed graduates of a master's level program in the State of South Carolina has reduced the efficacy of meeting licensure requirements; thus, fewer graduates are applying for licensure. In order for an individual to obtain a license in the field of counseling, he or she must complete a multi-step, time-consuming process (Mester et al., 2009). When an individual obtains licensure in the State of South Carolina, they signal to the public that they have met the highest level of qualification for their profession (Mester et al., 2009). Many South Carolina state agencies, such as SCDSS, SCDMH, and SCDJJ are able to hire non-licensed master's level staff to fulfill licensed counselor positions, if they secure a contractual licensed counselor to provide an approval signature (SCDHHS, 2018). However, South Carolina has also mandated that if third-party reimbursement through a private provider is expected, the person must be fully licensed and credentialed for the agency to receive reimbursement (SCDHHS, 2018).

Though previous researchers have examined the counselors in training process and counselor self-efficacy, little is known about the decision-making process that master's level counseling graduates undergo as they decide whether to pursue licensure. The purpose of this qualitative, comparative case study was to describe the experiences of counseling students transitioning to professionals in South Carolina regarding the decision to pursue licensure and its implications on employment. The study was guided by the following essential question: "What experiences, knowledge, skills, and abilities separate master's level counselors who pursue licensure in South Carolina from master's level counselors who do not pursue licensure as they seek employment?" It was focused

non-licensed counselors versus licensed counselors and their respective knowledge, skills, and abilities to work as mental health professionals.

This chapter presents results of the current investigation. It begins with a discussion of the study setting and participant demographics. Data collection procedures are also detailed, followed by the steps of analysis and evidence of trustworthiness. Results are discussed thematically in alignment with the research question. The chapter closes with a concise summary of Chapter 4 and transition to Chapter 5.

Setting

The study settings were private locations that were convenient to each participant. Interviews were conducted remotely over the phone with video chat in locations that were private and free of disruption. Participation was completely voluntary, and participants did not have to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable. There were no notable organizational or social conditions that may have influenced participants' perspectives relative to the research questions.

Participant Demographics

Study participants included six counselors who provide services to the public in South Carolina; four are licensed and two are unlicensed. The following is a brief description of the six study participants.

Participant 1

Participant 1 is an LPC at a large behavioral health organization with multiple locations throughout South Carolina. She is also a devoted triathlete and describes herself as very determined and "not a quitter." Participant 1 acknowledged the long and

frustrating road to licensing, explaining that it was a difficult and expensive process. However, she believed licensing was important for clinicians because it ensured they had the skills and experiences needed to handle challenging patients and situations. Participant 1 overcame personal and professional obstacles to obtain her license because she was committed to achieving the goal; the mentality of a high-level athlete seemed to permeate her professional life.

Participant 2

Participant 2 is an LPC and facility supervisor in private practice. She is a Caucasian woman in her early 60s. She completed her master's degree in mental health counseling and is certified as a master's level addiction counselor. Participant 2 retired from the county and has worked part-time in private practice since 2011. She found working for the county to be exhausting and demanding due to administrative duties and meetings. Participant 2 admitted that the road to licensure is challenging.

Participant 3

Participant 3 has a doctorate in counseling psychology and owns her own private practice. She is licensed in Georgia and South Carolina. Before she obtained her licenses, she did not feel she was as effective as she could have been. Prior to becoming licensed, she worked with youth counseling programs. Because she transitioned straight from her master's program to a doctoral program, Participant 3 did not immediately obtain her license. She also admitted to putting off the licensing exam because she is "a procrastinator." Because there was a time delay between completing her master's degree and sitting for the licensing exam, she felt the test was a little more difficult for her.

Participant 4

Participant 4 is a LPC in South Carolina and Florida. She is a female Caucasian in her early 60s. She received her Master of Science degree and obtained her counseling license in Florida. She dealt with a challenging reciprocity system to have her license acknowledged in South Carolina. After completing her degree, she spent an additional 3 years getting her hours and preparing to pass the licensure exam. Participant 4 became a counselor later in life, after switching careers multiple times and discovering a renewed desire to help people going through difficult life circumstances. She shared that of all her previous careers, counseling was the most rewarding and satisfying. She worked full time during her coursework for her counseling degree and was able to avoid taking on heavy student loans as a result.

Participant 5

Participant 5 has a master's degree in psychology and works for a Head Start program, helping children with physical and mental disabilities. She did not complete an internship as part of her graduate education and does not have a counseling license. She is part of the first generation in her family to go to college and admitted she did not have a role model or mentor to guide her through the process. She did not realize until already being significantly through her master's program that she needed to be on a licensure track. Participant 5 admits that she should have pursued licensure when she was still in school, but she became so overwhelmed through her education and lacked guidance to help her get on that track.

Participant 6

Participant 6 is an African American woman in her mid-40s who does not possess a counseling license. She completed a marriage and family therapy (MFT) program. She is a member of a number of professional counseling associations and has been working as a clinician for the past 2 years. Her desire to help others from broken homes was a primary motivation for pursuing a career in counseling. She initially wanted to work as a family lawyer but struggled to get into law school and decided to change course and pursue her MFT degree. Participant 6 was initially in an LPC degree program but felt the direction was too general and worried she would have trouble getting a job without a more specialized education.

Table 1 provides a side-by-side comparison of the six participants in this study. Five of the participants possessed master's degrees and one had a doctorate. All participants were women. Four were licensed and two were unlicensed.

Table 1

Comparison of Study Participant Characteristics

Participant	Education Level	Licensed	Gender
1	Master's	Y	F
2	Master's	Y	F
3	Doctorate	Y	F
4	Master's	Y	F
5	Master's	N	F
6	Master's	N	F

Theme Development

As presented in Chapter 3, themes were developed using the steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006), including: (a) review transcripts carefully, (b) code transcripts,

(c) compile codes into themes, (d) examine themes against the research questions and framework, (e) define themes, and (f) produce a narrative of the results. Step 1 involved a careful review of all transcripts, which allowed me to become familiar with all data while beginning to identify repetition in the transcripts. In Step 2 interview transcripts were coded. Repeated ideas, utterances, words, or phrases were assigned code names and placed throughout the transcripts, where the codes occurred. Each transcript was reviewed three times during the coding process to ensure no codes were missed. A total of 40 initial codes emerged from the coding process: challenges to licensure, decision-making skills, does not have license, documentation requirement challenges (as a counselor), desire to help others, exam challenges/experiences, educational experience, education motivation, educational networking, educational and professional background, educational transition experience, financial concerns, hiring approach to non-licensed applicants, has children, has internship experience, has license, helped prepare, insurance panels, life experience, liability/insurance concerns, licensure motivation, level of satisfaction with current position, licensure time element, knowledge of licensure process, minority exclusion, mentor help, need for knowledge, no internship experience, professional counseling (field) challenges, personal drive, professional goals, peer influence, professional motivation, professional methodologies/strategies, private (licensed) practice vs “public practice” (state agency, etc.), professional networking, salary conditions, too much paperwork, too many regulations, and works (predominantly) with children.

For Step 3, all codes were compiled into a single list and reviewed in context of the research questions and theoretical framework. Codes that did not align with the aim of the study were identified and discarded. Eight discarded codes included (a) decision-making skills, (b) has children, (c) level of satisfaction with current position, (d) minority exclusion, (e) peer influence, (f) professional methodologies/strategies, (g) private (licensed) practice vs. public practice, and (h) works (predominantly) with children. The code "decision-making skills" was removed because it only appeared twice in the data. Upon review, I also noticed a number of other codes fell under the category of decision-making skills, such as "helped prepare," "life experience," "mentor help" and "licensure motivation." Thus, I reviewed the two occurrences of the decision-making skills code and replaced them with more specific and relevant codes (one was replaced by "life experience" and the other by "mentor help"). In Step 4, the remaining 32 codes were grouped based on similarities, and those groupings were used to develop the study themes. The following seven themes emerged: (a) motivation, (b) experience, (c) knowledge, (d) support resources, (e) costs, (f) licensure challenges, and (g) professional challenges. Each of these themes and their associated codes are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2

Themes and Associated Codes

Theme	Associated Codes
Motivation	Desire to Help Others
	Helped Prepare
	Licensure Motivation
	Personal Drive
	Professional Goals
	Professional Motivation
Experience	Educational and Professional Background
	Educational Transition Experience
	Has Internship Experience
	No Internship Experience
	Has License
	Life Experience
Knowledge	Educational Experience
	Knowledge of Licensure Process
	Need for Knowledge
	Education Motivation
Support Resources	Educational Networking
	Mentor Help
	Professional Networking
Costs	Financial Concerns
	Salary Conditions
Licensure Challenges	Challenges to Licensure
	Does Not Have License
	Exam Challenges/Experiences
	Hiring Approach to Non-Licensed Applicants
	Licensure Time Element
Professional Challenges	Insurance Panels
	Liability/Insurance Concerns
	Professional Counseling (field) Challenges (field = in counseling field)
	Too Much Paperwork
	Too Many Regulations
	Documentation Requirement Challenges (as a counselor)

In Step 5, the seven themes were then defined. The definition of the seven themes were as follows:

- **Motivation:** Personal motivating factors, such as the desire to help others or achieve personal goals, affected participants' drive toward licensure.
- **Experience:** Factors related to personal and professional experiences influenced participants' decisions regarding the pursuit of licensure.
- **Knowledge**: Participants' knowledge, including their educational backgrounds and their understandings of licensure processes and benefits, influenced licensure decisions.
- **Support resources:** Social support resources, in the form of mentors, role models, and professional networking, may affect counselors' decisions to pursue licensure.
- **Costs**: The costs associated with education, examination, internships, and supervision can be deterrents to licensure.
- **Licensure challenges:** Specific elements of the examination and licensure process, such as challenges passing exams or the time required to complete licensure, may also dissuade counselors from pursuing licensure.
- **Professional challenges:** A number of professional challenges may dissuade counselors from pursuing licensure, especially when those challenges undermine professional satisfaction and commitment.

For the sixth step of the analysis, the themes were compiled into a narrative of the results. Themes are presented in the next section.

Theme Analysis

Analysis of participant interviews revealed seven key themes: (a) motivation, (b) experience, (c) knowledge, (d) support resources, (e) costs, (f) licensure challenges, and (g) professional challenges. Each of these themes are defined in the following sections.

Theme 1: Motivation

The first theme to emerge from participant interviews was motivation. Participants described several personal motivating factors, such as the desire to help others or achieve personal goals, which affected their drive toward licensure. An intrinsic desire to help others was described by participants, who sometimes saw licensure as a tool that allowed them to reach more people in need. For example, Participant 3 had initially pursued a career in law but found herself drawn toward a career in counseling because she wanted to help people in a more personal way: "I had always been interested in counseling, people always came to me with their problems." Having worked as a family mediator, Participant 3 also recognized counseling had the potential to help entire family units. Personal challenges were also motivator for some participants. Participant 1 became a professional counselor because of personal challenges she had contended with. When asked why she became a counselor, she shared,

> My own struggles. A lot of counselors are, they call them healers, they want to go into counseling because of their own struggles and how they overcame those. But I didn't really go into college wanting to be anything like that until I actually made up my mind, my second semester of my freshman year, I declared my major in psychology. So, I was sure by then.

The joy of helping others was a powerful motivator, as well. Participant 4 described her excitement when she witnessed the positive effects she had on clients: “I get, just like, so excited.” Participant 4 later shared an anecdote about working with a particular client who had made a lot of progress, describing the process as “so cool!” Participant 5’s desire was focused on addressing the breakdown of the African American family and “helping to empower other fellow humans.” Participant 6 was also motivated by a desire to heal broken families, as well as a desire to help others actualize their potential; she shared: “So that is what drives me … that you can do better than what you're doing. And I'm going to help you do that, I want to help you do that, because I really believe that you can do better.”

Participants also described intrinsic personal and professional drivers that influenced their career decisions as counselors, such as their levels of commitment and willingness to help others. Participant 5 described her desire to “give back” in any way she could. Participant 2 emphasized her commitment to her clients, especially when working with families: “You have to really be committed.” Later, Participant 2 shared, “I was willing to do whatever, because I just wanted, I mean, I was willing.” This sense of commitment and determination helped some participants persist through challenges to obtain licensure. For example, Participant 3 described the process as “a long road” and shared how her personal drive led her to conduct research and move to an area where she knew nobody, in order to pursue her counseling degree. Participant 1 struggled to obtain her license, but repeatedly mentioned, “I wasn’t going to give up.”

Largely, participants seemed goal-oriented, and were willing to endure challenging roads to degrees and licenses in order to achieve personal and professional goals. Participant 3 wanted to maximize her ability to contribute and help others and knew the path to that goal involved completing her master's degree and obtaining her license: "I need to get a master's and get my license." Participant 6 shared a similar goal that was currently driving her toward licensure: "I decided, you know what? I'll just go ahead an' get my master's." Participant 4 shared, "There was no question that I would get my license." In addition to goals related to her counseling profession, Participant 1 discussed personal athletic goals of becoming a professional triathlete, as well as future professional goals of becoming a nurse practitioner. The inherent drive toward *winning* seemed to influence Participant 1's general attitude toward life: "We all know that I love to win."

Finally, participants described factors that motivated them, not just toward their profession, but toward licensure. Participant 1 believed licensure ensured counselors were more cautious and autonomous in their professional decisions and behaviors' "Because they're under law. They don't have to be babysat as much, probably. I'm not saying the other one doesn't know the laws, but if your license is o' the line, you're a lot more careful than careless." Participant 4 echoed this sentiment, 'haring, "There's some accountability with licensing." Participant 2 acknowledged that counselors could get jobs without licensure, but that quality of those positions may be low: "The types of jobs you can get are really very horrendous ones, like with the youth, the incorrigible youth or something where they might be spitting on you and that kind of thing." In addition,

Participant 2 felt a tight job market made it more difficult for unlicensed counselors to secure jobs, 'haring: "There's so many people applying for the same job, what's gonna make you stand out above another?"

Finally, the prospects of making more money motivated participants to pursue licensure. As Participant 2 explained, "I decided to go back t' get my master's, and then, I did that, and worked on the licensure part because you could make more money if you had your license done." Participant 5 was also motivated to pursue licensure because of the improved salary that accompanied licensure. Participant 3's intrinsic drive to help others motivated her to obtain her license because she felt without it, she was not as effective as she could be with her clients: "I wanted to be licensed and make sure I was proficient."

Theme 2: Experience

The second theme to emerge from participant interviews related to personal, professional, and educational experiences that influenced professional decisions, such as licensure. For example, when asked about what led her toward a career in human services, Participant 2 relied, "Well, I'm a Christian, and I have the experience, well, I've had a lot of life experience, let's say that." Later, Participant 2 described the moment that led her to switch careers, mid-life:

> I was about 40, and I was at my church, and I heard a message at Christmas time, and they had been doing like, testing in the church to see where your spiritual gifts are to benefit the church, or you know, to benefit God or whatever. And, just looking at a lot of my spiritual gifts and my experience that I had gone through

> earlier in my life, I realized that maybe that I got sidetracked, that that was really, the gifting that I had was counseling.

Participant 5 reflected on how her own struggles attracted her into the counseling profession, from the perspective of making mistakes, learning from them, and recovering. She shared, “And making sure you learn from mistake’. You know, we're all gonna make them, but - how do we recover? How do we bounce back?”

Participants also discussed their educational paths, which often involved overcoming barriers and transferring schools. Experiences with internships were also mentioned as factors that affected licensure decisions because internships sometimes provided participants with information and resources needed to navigate the path to licensure. For example, Participant 2 did an internship as a recovery assistant, which allowed her to be in direct contact with patients, helping them on a daily basis. Participant 3 described her graduate school experience and internship as “great.” Participant 4 completed a 2-year internship with teenagers, and Participant 6’s internship allowed her to begin building her client roster before going out on her own.

Internships were not described as particularly beneficial for all participants, however. For example, Participant 1 had experience from her practicum and internship, but shared, “it's not putting you in a situation where you're actually on your own.” Participant 5, who was not certified, had not gone through an internship as part of her education.

Theme 3: Knowledge

Knowledge, in terms of education related to the profession and licensure, also affected participants' professional decisions. Within this theme, participants discussed their educational experiences, their understandings of the licensure processes, their need for additional knowledge, and the strategies they employed to improve knowledge needed to be successful in their careers. Motivation to become knowledgeable of a number of factors related to the counseling profession was strong among participants. For example, Participant 4 was motivated by her own curiosity about human psychology: "I realized that I was often, you know, over the years, was always reading about psychology, and it always fascinated me, you know, trying to figure out how people are motivated, how they may do change." Participant 5 was motivated by her hunger for knowledge and firm belief in the power of higher education: "What led me to pursue [a career in counseling] was that I've always been a fan of higher education, and I knew that I wanted to aspire t' get my master's and eventually my terminal degree." Participant 6's motivation to pursue her master's degree was that once obtained, she believed her education was something that could never be taken from her: "Once you do the master's, no one can take that from you. Once you have it, it's yours."

Participant 1 recognized education was a lifelong process, and that as a professional, she needed to be in a state of constant learning: "There's so many things I learned recently or within the last'2 years that I'm still learning as an LPC." Participant 3 emphasized that counselors should "learn as much as you can!" When discussing the value of supervised hours, Participant 4 described the process as valuable because "You

learn a lot from that." Participant 4 described a variety of things she learned during internships and supervision, which she was not taught in school. Participant 5 worked hard to stay abreast of new information in her field in order to be the best clinician she could: "So, I gotta make sure I have the best information. So, research has to come into play."

Theme 4: Support Resources

Support resources, especially in the form of mentorship and career advice, influenced participants' career and licensure decisions. Participant 4 describe influential support from career counselors, who shared their own experiences about returning to school later in life: "They had all gone back to school later in life, too, to got their master's degree, and so, I asked about it and I got interested again, and realized, you know, that's sort of was what I wanted to do." The academic support Participant 1 received in her program helped push her toward licensure. She explained, "They were really pushed for finishing, take the licensure test right away, take it. They didn't want us to wait, just take it right away." In addition, the academic program Participant 1 was in set her up with a supervisor and helped her fill out the application for licensure examination. For Participant 1's program, licensure was viewed as essential to the profession. Similarly, Participant 3 shared that in some of her classes, she was provided with information about licensure: "So they were talking about preparing for the licensure process, and how that would be."

Additional help, in the form of mentorship, academic advising, and career counseling, may have helped participants during their educational and licensure journeys.

For example, Participant 3 shared she did not receive much help in the form of career counseling but had to do her own research to make career decisions. When discussing the licensure exam, Participant 4 shared that often, counselors' supervisors or internships did not provide them with the support needed to grow, professionally. When asked about advice she would give to students considering a career in counseling, Participant 5 shared,

> I would strongly suggest having a mentor. I think mentorship is critical. Having a relationship with your department chair is important, because those are people in those positions that are supposed to be helping to guide you to make the best choices for your professional career path.

Participant 5 later added, "I think mentorship is good. And just doing as much research, so that you know what your opportunities are gonna be like, whether you go licensure or not licensure." In addition to the benefits of a one-on-one mentoring relationship, counseling students could also benefit from the social support of professional networks. Without this type of networking support, new graduates can struggle to get access to information they need and secure jobs. As Participant 4 shared,

> and then I didn't know, coming here, I did get a like, you know, I was licensed and everything, but I didn't know what – wanted to do - If I wanted to go work for an agency, or a hospital, or start private practice again which is hard because, you know, I didn't have any of the, a referral network.

This sentiment was echoed by Participant 5, who shared, "I think having professional circles is important because people can speak to their experiences and what they know.

You never know who's tied and connected so that they can share information with you." Participant 5 also shared how she did not receive follow-up regarding her degree path when she was in school. She had not realized how important licensure was at the time, and she believed most professors just assumed she was on a licensure path. Participant 5 shared:

> But still, never that real engagement of, you know, "Hey! You ever thought about, you know, goin towards that?" because some people may assume that you're already on that track, and may not know, so the conversation was, those conversations were never really had.

Theme 5: Costs

The costs associated with licensure emerged as another primary theme in this study. Participants discussed the financial burdens not only associated with completing their degree programs, but also of completing internships, supervision hours, and sitting for the licensure exam. For example, Participant 2 explained students often desired to complete licensure, but lacked the money needed to do so. Participant 2 'hared, "And it's very expensive, too. You've gotta have all these hours every year, you know, to keep your license and keep your job. And I think it's really' by nature, it's a huge investment to pay back." Participant 5 mentioned the cost of her education, describing her student loan debt as "astronomical." Similarly, Participant 6 was paying out of pocket for school because she had exhausted her student loan money. Viewing licensure as a "huge investment" could certainly dissuade individuals from pursuing licensure, especially if the eventual payoff is not perceived as greater than the costs of licensure. Further, clinicians are often

working and supporting families while they are in school and pursuing licensure, which can further increase the financial burden of licensure. Participant 4 shared,

> Yeah. And if the agency won't pay for your training, and you don't have the means yourself. Yeah, and I think it depends, too, what time in life you get it. If you get it while you have your children, that's a–balancing act - both financially and timewise.

While the costs of licensure may create barriers for some counselors, participants also discussed the financial benefits of becoming licensed. The salary conditions and outlook for licensed versus non-licensed counselors were discussed, with most participants agreeing licensure was accompanied by higher salaries. For example, Participant 1 shared that non-licensed counselors may make salaries in the high 30's, but licensed professionals could command salaries as high as $75,000. Participant 3 admitted that licensure allowed counselors to command higher rates. Importantly, this view was not shared by all participants; Participant 4 felt the pay increase associated with licensure "isn't often higher," making the investment required to become licensed an unattractive one.

Theme 6: Licensure Challenges

Several challenges were mentioned that could impede counselors' paths toward licensure. For example, the process was described as confusing and cumbersome, and often, participants did not receive clear direction about how to become certified. For example, when asked about if she understood the licensing process, Participant 5 replied, "Not 100%." Later, Participant 5 added, "But, you know, I still don't know which way to

go a lot of times because the state is so different." Participants also mentioned the time commitment of licensure and difficulties associated with passing the licensure exam. For example, Participant 1 shared,

> So, it was very emotional when I actually got it because I thought it was never going to come. I did not have to ask for an extension, but I went through a lot within those two years to finish up with four different supervisors… And then they have to approve of all that. So that was a long process.

Similarly, Participant 2 explained, "is hard to work, you know, pay for all this stuff and then, you know, have time for your family or your persona' interests. It's just, it can be quite time-consuming." Participant 3 described licensure as "a frustrating and tedious process," sharing "I feel more like it's a survival of the fittest type thing than actually a knowledge-based thing." Participant described the process as "time-consuming" and Participant 3 admitted, "it takes so much of your time and so much energy to be licensed." Participant 3 later described licensure as "a long road." Even after going through the arduous process of licensure, participants admitted that employment was not guaranteed. Participant 2'explained, "It's hard, and sometimes they actually pass the test, but they cannot find a place to practice."

Another issue is that when graduates complete their education and take time off before sitting for the licensure exam, passing can become more difficult because the information is no longer fresh in their minds. As Participant 3 explained, "If you took the class in 2007, and tried to take the test in 2017, it's a totally different world. So, take it as closely to, as you can, to when you're finishing classes." Time off after school can also

cause counselors to delay taking the exam out of fear. When Participant 5 was asked why she thought some people did not pursue licensure, she replied, “I think fear of the exam.”

Theme 7: Professional Challenges

A final theme to emerge from interviews was *professional challenges,* which described professional factors that may dissuade counselors from pursuing licensure. While this theme was not directly related to licensure, it does shed light on professional frustrations that may cause counselors to opt against the hassle of licensure, especially if those frustrations cause them to consider other career options. A number of professional challenges were mentioned by participants, including hassles with insurance panels, liability, administrative loads, and regulations. For example, Participant 1 ’hared, “I wasn't very fond of all the paperwork,” while Participant 2 shared, “The requirements by law for all the paperwork and documentation and meetings and all these things that were required, it was just becoming unbearable.” Participant 4 described administrative and regulatory burdens she experienced in one of her positions:

> I remember from the agency when it was the Department of Justice that, like at the teen center it was Juvenile Justice that was coming to check our records, and they had so many rules about how we continued onto the next page, and on and on.

When asked about her professional satisfaction, Participant 5 replied, “There's pros and cons because productivity, paperwork, planning, all of those pieces go together.” Participant 1 lamented about the extraordinary amount of time it takes to become insured.

Theme Summary

Table 3 summarizes seven themes derived from participant interviews.

Table 3

Summary of Themes

Theme	Description
Motivation	Personal motivating factors, such as the desire to help others or achieve personal goals, affected participants' drive toward licensure.
Experience	Factors related to personal and professional experiences influenced participants' decisions regarding the pursuit of licensure.
Knowledge	Participants' knowledge, including their educational backgrounds and their understandings of licensure processes and benefits, influenced licensure decisions.
Support resources	Social support resources, in the form of mentors, role models, and professional networking, may affect counselors' decisions to pursue licensure.
Costs	The costs associated with education, examination, internships, and supervision can be deterrents to licensure.
Licensure challenges	Specific elements of the examination and licensure process, such as challenges passing exams or the time required to complete licensure, may also dissuade counselors from pursuing licensure.
Professional challenges	A number of professional challenges may dissuade counselors from pursuing licensure, especially when those challenges undermine professional satisfaction and commitment.

Summary and Transition

The purpose of this qualitative comparative case study was to describe the experiences of counseling students transitioning to professionals in South Carolina, by exploring why some counseling graduates pursued licensure while others did not. In addition, the employment implications of these decisions were examined. I focused on two groups: non-licensed counselors versus licensed counselors and their knowledge, skills, and abilities to work as mental health professionals. The study was guided by the following essential question: What experiences, knowledge, skills, and abilities separate master's level counselors who pursue licensure in the State of Carolina from master's level counselors who do not pursue licensure as they seek employment?

Analysis of participant interviews revealed seven key themes: (a) motivation, (b) experience, (c) knowledge, (d) support resources, (e) costs, (f) licensure challenges, and (g) professional challenges.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of study findings. Implications of these findings, as well as practical recommendations and opportunities for future research, are discussed. The impact for practice and positive social change are also presented.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

In this qualitative, comparative case study I explored why some counseling graduates pursued licensure and others did not, describing the experiences of counseling students transitioning to counseling professionals in South Carolina. Though previous researchers have examined the counselors in training process and counselor self-efficacy, little was known about the decision-making process that master's level counseling graduates undergo as they decide whether to pursue licensure. Additionally, there is a lack of licensed professional counselors in South Carolina. The study was guided by the following essential question: What experiences, knowledge, skills, and abilities separate Master's-level counselors who pursue licensure in the State of South Carolina from Master's-level counselors who do not pursue licensure as they seek employment? This is essential to understanding the driving factors behind licensure decisions for counselors as they prepare and enter the workforce. In addition, this research shed light on participants' career strategies and factors that affected their career decision-making. Because of the lack of licensed professional counselors in the State of South Carolina, I sought to understand the rationale for participating in a licensure program but opting against licensure.

Data were collected via individual, semistructured interviews with a purposeful sample of six counselors who provided counseling services in South Carolina. Four of the participants were licensed and two were unlicensed. Thematic analysis of participant interviews revealed seven key themes: (a) motivation, (b) experience, (c) knowledge, (d)

support resources, (e) costs, (f) licensure challenges, and (g) professional challenges. Each of these themes are interpreted and discussed, as follows.

Interpretation of the Findings

Theme 1: Motivation

The first theme to emerge from participant interviews was motivation, which was defined as personal motivating factors, such as the desire to help others or achieve personal goals. Many participants were intrinsically motivated to become counselors and pursue licensure, as they saw these as professional tools for helping more people. Overall, participants described a strong sense of joy, happiness, and purpose, which propelled them toward licensure. Intrinsic motivation was additionally associated with participants' orientation toward goals and achievement. Tenacity and commitment toward career development were also powerful motivators toward licensure; participants were aware that licensure afforded them more opportunities and the potential for better income. Participants also understood that licensure provided more professional autonomy and reduced the likelihood of careless mistakes.

Overall, findings under this theme align with those reported by previous researchers. For example, the ACA (2014) reported that licenses are important for prohibiting unlawful practice among counselors and protecting the well-being of clients. Career motivation has also been examined in a way that supports findings from this study. London (1983) emphasized the role of career motivation in individuals' professional decisions, and according to his theory, career motivation is comprised of resilience, identity, and insight. Resilience describes maintenance or persistence; identity

describes the direction of motivation; and insight describes the energizing factors that prompt individuals to make career planning decisions (Alniacik et al., 2012). Though participants in the current study did not allude to resilience, interview findings were associated with identity and insight. Participants' professional identities as counselors may be linked to their motivation to advance their careers and seek development (Alniacik et al., 2012), and insight can nurture excitement about the professional possibilities of advancement decisions, such as licensure. That excitement can then manifest as motivation to pursue professional advancement via licensure.

Previous researchers have also discussed how commitment and job satisfaction can foster career motivation. Individuals who like their jobs are more likely to invest time in their professional development and networking activities (Alniacik et al., 2012). In this way, individuals who are satisfied with their professions may be more apt to pursue professional licenses and additional training because they are committed to their careers (Chen et al., 2010). The passion and satisfaction participants described when discussing their roles as counselors provided evidence of job satisfaction that may have certainly motivated them to advance their careers through licensure.

Theme 2: Experience

The second theme to emerge from participant interviews related to personal, professional, and educational experiences that influenced professional decisions, such as licensure. First, personal experiences with trauma or crises ignited participants' desire to help others dealing with similar trauma. Such desire is common, as people often find a rewarding sense of purpose in helping others overcome challenges they have experienced

themselves. Previous researchers have reported this phenomenon through a number of constructs, including the concepts of *career calling* and *wounded healers*. For example, Riffle (2016) found that post-traumatic growth among those who experienced traumatic events significantly influenced their career decisions. People who experience trauma and then feel compelled to help others dealing with similar traumas are described as wounded healers (Lasinsky, 2020). Personal trauma and post-traumatic growth can prompt individuals to enter mental health professions, as healing others helps to foster individuals' personal growth and healing (Bray, 2019; Byrne & Ost, 2015).

Theme 3: Knowledge

The third theme to emerge was knowledge in terms of education related to the counseling profession and licensure. Participants' knowledge included their educational backgrounds and their understandings of licensure processes and benefits. Participants were aware that knowledge and education were essential to their career success, and desires to help others through their careers prompted action to obtain more career-related knowledge and skills. Largely, participants viewed education as a lifelong process rather than one that stopped upon degree completion.

Previous researchers have described the ways an orientation toward lifelong learning can positively influence career decisions and trajectories. Jaeger et al. (2017) argued that "career decisions do not result from predetermined paths; rather, they are actively sought via a lifelong learning process resulting from the interaction of the individual with (their) environments" (p. 480). The environments that counselors interact with may include their workplaces, coworkers, and the clients they serve. When learning

is viewed as a lifelong process, professionals may make decisions regarding educational attainment and professional development on an ongoing basis. An orientation toward lifelong learning helps facilitate professional development (Bernard & Oster, 2018). Counselors who did not initially plan to obtain licensure upon graduation may evolve within their profession, later realizing licensure provides more personal and professional opportunities.

Decisions to pursue licensure can also be examined through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Over time, professionals advance through the five stages of need, including physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. From this perspective, decisions to pursue licensure may relate to esteem, in terms of being viewed as an expert in their respective field. Counselors' decisions to obtain more knowledge and become licensed may not only relate to the desire to help others in more profound ways or to advance their careers; these decisions may also relate to a desire to earn esteem and respect within the profession. At the stage of esteem, people may have career stability but be motivated to do more such as becoming an expert. Schulte (2018) explained a "worker has reached relative career stability but is motivated to go further and do more. A mixture of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation embodies the desires at this stage, which may include management positions or executive roles. In some career paths, this level would require becoming a noted expert in the field". (p. 64).

Theme 4: Support Resources

The fourth theme to emerge from the analysis was support resources, especially in the form of mentorship and career advice. Support and encouragement from career

counselors, professors, and mentors encouraged participants to pursue licensure. Although most participants did not find much value from internships, the one-on-one support through personal relationships with mentors and colleagues often inspired them to go the extra trouble of earning or considering licensure after graduation.

A large body of research exists on the ways support resources foster career advancement. Researchers have examined the roles of mentorship and other forms of social support as pathways toward advancement within several career contexts. For example, Zimmermann (2019) argued that mentorship is a promising strategy for fostering career promotion and advancement among women in gastroenterology. Similarly, Montgomery (2017) explained that mentoring could help individuals in any field develop supportive networks needed to strategically advance. Researchers have also noted the benefits of mentoring in helping mentees more quickly obtain licensure and credentials (Burns, 2019).

Theme 5: Costs

The fifth theme to emerge was costs associated with the licensure. The costs associated with education, examination, internships, and supervision can be deterrents to licensure. Participants discussed the financial burdens not only associated with completing their degree programs but also with completing internships, supervision hours, and sitting for the licensure exam. The cost of licensure was a major barrier for some participants. Financial barriers associated with pursuing educational or career advancement have also been discussed by previous researchers, supporting that cost is a barrier to social workers (Boute-Queen, 1993), nurses (Watson, 2004), and even

professional counselors who moved across state lines due to new licensure requirements (Elliot et al., 2019). Certainly, cost associated with licensure are multifaceted for professional counselors and may deter the pursuit of licenses.

Theme 6: Licensure Challenges

The sixth theme to emerge was licensure challenges. Specific elements of the examination and licensure process, such as challenges passing exams or the time required to complete licensure, may also dissuade counselors from pursuing licensure. Study participants described the process of licensure as tedious, frustrating, and confusing. An important finding to emerge within this theme related to participants' fear of failure. Though the lack of clarity regarding the licensure process was frustrating, this was an easier hurdle to overcome than was the fear of failing the licensure exam. Participants described anxiety about investing the time and money in licensure only to risk failing the exam. For many, the time that lapsed between graduating from their degree programs and taking the exam created fears of failure because the content was no longer "fresh" in their minds.

A large body of literature has been dedicated to examining the ways such fears can undermine professional advancement and success. For example, Czekanski et al. (2018) found that fears and anxieties related to taking and passing the NCLEX-RN exam were strongly due to the fear of failure. The fear of failure can also cause people to procrastinate, which can then amplify their fears (Zarrin, 2020). In the case of counselors, such fears may cause them to put off the state licensure exam, which then makes them more anxious about taking the exam down the road because the material is no longer

fresh in their minds. Importantly, even highly motivated individuals can experience fear of failure (Ng & Jenkins, 2018).

Theme 7: Professional Challenges

Finally, professional challenges emerged as the seventh theme. Several professional challenges may dissuade counselors from pursuing licensure, especially when those challenges undermine professional satisfaction and commitment. Although this theme was not directly related to licensure, it did reveal professional frustrations that can cause counselors to opt against licensure, especially if those frustrations cause them to consider other career options. A number of professional challenges were mentioned by participants, including hassles with insurance panels, liability, administrative loads, and regulations. However, an in-depth review of the existing literature reviewed a lack of investigation on the ways such professional challenges may undermine professional licensure decisions, indicating an opportunity for future research.

Licensed and Non-Licensed Participant Similarities and Differences

An important goal of this project was to uncover similarities and differences between licensed and unlicensed counselors to better understand why some individuals pursue licensure and others do not. To begin, many similarities between the two groups existed. Both licensed and unlicensed participants described high levels of motivation to help others and strong goal orientation. They described the ways their personal backgrounds influenced decisions to become counselors and emphasized the importance of support resources. Both groups of participants also described confusion and lack of clarity in the licensure processes.

Though some information from the interviews were common for both licensed and unlicensed participants, important differences between the two groups emerged. First, licensed participants acknowledged that licensure was associated with better professional opportunities. In contrast, unlicensed participants did not mention differences in career opportunities, suggesting that a strong awareness of the professional benefits associated with licensure may motivate counselors to become licensed. There was also a slight difference with internship experiences between the two groups; all licensed participants completed internships, but only one of the unlicensed participants (Participant 6) completed an internship. It is possible that internships inspired licensed participants to pursue licensure, despite associated challenges.

Next, unlicensed participants emphasized the importance of obtaining their master's degrees; however, licensed participants described education as a lifelong process. That is, licensed participants seemed to believe education extended beyond the completion of their degrees, emphasizing the importance of ongoing education and professional development. This difference, although slight, may indicate differences in perspectives and mindset between the two groups. Licensure requires individuals to continue to learn and study after they graduate from school, so the mindset of a lifelong learner may foster the continued education and studying required to become licensed.

Finally, both licensed and unlicensed participants mentioned the cost barrier to licensure, but only unlicensed participants seemed to view this barrier as particularly problematic. Further, licensed participants, though acknowledging the costs of licensure, emphasized the long-term financial benefits of obtaining their licenses, such as through

higher salaries, better benefits, and more career opportunities. Viewing licensure as an initial investment that would pay off in the long-term may have helped motivate the licensed participants to obtain licenses.

Limitations of the Study

This study was subject to limitations. First, the qualitative nature of the investigation and its inductive analysis process made it subject to research bias. Accordingly, my feelings and preconceived notions could have influenced study outcomes. Despite my intentional actions to bracket out biases and objectively approach data, some degree of inherent bias was unavoidable.

A second limitation related to the sample size. I had a difficult time recruiting participants for this study, which was probably related to the busy professional and personal schedules of most counselors. Because of the challenges with recruitment, the final sample was smaller than anticipated. However, interviews provided enough rich and detailed data for saturation to be reached, so this limitation was accepted.

Another limitation of this study was time. I was under pressure to recruit and interview participants within a short window of time in order to finish this dissertation. If more time had been available, it is possible that additional participants could have been recruited and interviewed. A final limitation related to the distribution of licensed and unlicensed participants. Because of the aforementioned challenges with recruitment, I was unable to obtain an even number of licensed and unlicensed participants. This unevenness created a slightly skewed sample, which may have affected the results. Had

more unlicensed counselors been recruited; it is possible that more details on licensure barriers may have been revealed.

Recommendations

Results from this study reveal a number of opportunities for future investigation. First, this study was limited to a small sample of six participants – four who were licensed and two who were unlicensed. Future researchers could replicate this study with a much larger sample to generate more robust findings. In addition, future researchers could ensure the sample was evenly divided between licensed and non-licensed participants. Geographically, this study was limited counselors located and practicing in the State of South Carolina. Additional studies could be conducted in other states where counselors are able to practice without licenses; such research could be used to identify similarities and differences in individuals' decisions and their barriers to licensure.

A review of the existing literature provides a dearth of information on the ways professional challenges may undermine licensure decisions, indicating an opportunity for future research. Findings from this study revealed professional challenges could dissuade counselors from pursuing licensure, especially if those challenges undermined their satisfaction and commitment. Intentions to seek out other career opportunities or careers because of professional challenges may certainly make the pursuit of licensure undesirable. However, the factors at play within the relationship between professional challenges and licensure decisions should be examined. For example, researchers could explore the effects of different professional challenges, such as interpersonal relations, caseloads, or insurance reimbursement hassles, on intent to pursue licensure. Such

research could lead to the clearer identification of resources and assistance that might encourage counselors to pursue licensure.

Future researchers could also explore counselors' intent to pursue licensure, longitudinally. Researchers could survey students during their counseling programs to assess overall intent to pursue licensure, then again, post-graduation. A follow-up survey, several years later, could reveal how many students intended to pursue licensure but did not. Researchers could then conduct follow-up interviews with those individuals to better understand the barriers that prevented them from obtaining their licenses.

Because social support, especially in the form of mentorship, can significantly improve individuals' educational attainment and career trajectories, researchers could conduct an intervention study to explore the effects of mentorship on licensure decisions. The effects of other forms of social and material support could also be examined. For example, participants in this study referenced the costs associated with licensure as significant barriers. Researchers could examine whether the reduction or elimination of licensure costs results in increased licensure, or if other barriers or excuses crop up in its place.

Implications

Several important implications emerged from study findings, including those related to positive social change, practice, and theory. Each category of implications is discussed, as follows.

Positive Social Change

Programs under the SCDHHS and other state agencies allow master's level human service professionals to provide counseling services that are the same as those provided by LPCs (SCDHHS, 2018). The acceptance of non-licensed graduates of a master's level program has reduced the efficacy of licensure requirements in the State of South Carolina; thus, fewer graduates are sitting for licensure examination. Because licensure in the State of South Carolina is strictly voluntary, many master's level counselors' practice without licenses. However, changing federal mandates makes it increasingly difficult for facilities to receive reimbursement for services provided by non-licensed counselors. In this way, licensed professionals may enjoy more professional opportunities.

Further, counselors who possess licensure may be more careful in their practice, not only because of the stronger skills and more in-depth knowledge among those capable of passing the licensure exam, but also because they know missteps can result in the loss of the licenses, they worked so hard to obtain. Government and state laws that require licensure or credentials are designed to protect the health and safety of all citizens (Hodges, 2021). Serious violations are sanctioned with fines, revocation of licenses, or imprisonment (ACA, 2014).

The benefits of licensure, both to professional counselors and their clients, should motivate counseling students to pursue licenses after graduation. However, many South Carolina counselors still practice without licenses because the state does not mandate licensure. Accordingly, the implications for positive social change to emerge from this

investigation relate to increasing licensure among South Carolinian counselors. Findings from this study revealed a number of barriers to licensure; by helping graduates overcome these barriers, it is possible that more counselors will obtain licensure. As a result, improvements may occur in the (a) quality of care provided to counseling clients and (b) career opportunities available to professional counselors.

Practical Implications

The practical implications to emerge from this investigation center around the licensure barriers described by participants. By acknowledging and addressing licensure barriers, stakeholders may improve the rate of licensure among professional counselors in the State of South Carolina. The two most salient categories of licensure barriers that may be addressed included costs and licensure challenges. Study participants described a number of costs associated with licensure, such as completing internships, supervision hours, and sitting for the licensure exam. In addition to the costs associated with schooling (i.e., tuition, books, etc.), graduates of counseling programs face new expenses related to licensure. For some new graduates, the financial costs are either insurmountable immediately following graduation, or new graduates do not perceive the costs of licensure to be worth the associated professional benefits. However, if new graduates are provided with resources to reduce licensing costs, it is possible that more professional counselors would pursue licensure. Facilities that provide counseling services could attract licensed counselors with sign-on bonuses or reimbursements for costs related to licensure. Similarly, facilities could help non-licensed counselors on staff obtain their licenses by covering costs associated with the exam.

Leaders and stakeholders could also help unlicensed professional counselors obtain licenses by helping them overcome licensure barriers unrelated to costs. Participants in this study described the licensure process as tedious, confusing, and frustrating. Leaders may consider how the licensure process may be streamlined to reduce these feelings of confusion or frustration. Perhaps licensure information should be more clearly provided in classes for counseling degree programs. Alternatively, schools could make sure resources are available to students, through career counselors or academic advisors, to help them efficiently navigate licensure. Because the fear of failure also emerged as a barrier related to licensure, resources that improve students' confidence in their abilities to pass the exam may also improve licensure rates. For example, schools may provide exam preparation courses to ensure students feel confident when sitting for the exam. Additionally, schools could provide exam study materials, free of charge, either online or in person. Online study groups could also be organized to help students develop a sense of support and camaraderie as they prepare for the exam.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical framework for this study was based on Bandura's (1986) SCCT and Krumboltz's (1979) SLTCDM. Bandura's (1986) SCCT is based on the concept of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals (Lent et al., 1994). Self-efficacy refers to the beliefs people have about their ability to successfully complete the steps required for a given task. In this study, the concept of self-efficacy was woven throughout participant interviews; those with a strong sense of self-efficacy were more likely to prepare for and take the licensure exam, while those with lower self-efficacy struggled with self-doubt,

fear of failure, or other obstacles. Findings from this study emphasize the importance of self-efficacy in licensing decisions. Professional counselors must not only see the value and benefits of licensure, but they must also view themselves as capable of overcoming the myriad economic and non-economic hurdles associated with licensure. Increasing the self-efficacy of counseling students during school, through the provision of social support and resources, may ultimately improve the rate of licensure among South Carolinian professional counselors.

The second theory used in this study was Krumboltz (1979) SLTCDM. Krumboltz expanded upon the three tenets of SCCT outlined by Bandura (1986) to develop SLTCDM. While SCCT focuses on individuals' self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goals, SLTCDM considers how genetics, environmental factors, educational experiences, cognitive responses, and performance skills interact to move individuals down their career paths (Krumboltz et al., 1976). Findings from this study support the influence of SLTCDM in the licensure decisions of professional counselors in South Carolina. While this study did not examine genetic factors related to career decisions, participants discussed the influence of education, environment, and performance, at length. Findings from this investigation emphasize the way SCCT and SLTCDM interact to influence the licensure decisions of professional counselors. Arguably, the decision to pursue licensure begins with an individual's perceptions of themselves as capable of taking and passing the licensure exam. On top of that, individuals' personal and educational experiences, skills, and backgrounds can influence their decisions. That is, even if a counselor is confident in their ability to pass the

licensure exam, they may still be dissuaded by other barriers, such as perceived costs and opportunities. Examining counselors' licensure decisions through the lenses of SCCT and SLTCDM revealed the importance of helping individuals overcome multiple layers of resistance and barriers they may encounter in pursuit of licensure – from beliefs about their capabilities, to perceptions of outside barriers such as costs, hassles, and frustrations.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to describe the experiences of counseling students transitioning to counseling professionals in South Carolina. The benefits of licensure, both to professional counselors and their clients, should motivate counseling students to pursue licenses after graduation. However, many South Carolina counselors still practice without licenses because the state does not mandate licensure. Interviews with licensed and non-licensed counselors practicing in South Carolina revealed a number of factors that encourage and impede licensure. A total of seven themes emerged from semi structured interviews with six participants, including motivation, experience, knowledge, support resources, costs, licensure challenges, and professional challenges.

Results revealed a number of ways schools and leaders may help reduce licensure barriers and increase the rate of licensure among South Carolina's professional counselors. Opportunities for future research to emerge from this investigation reveal a number of gaps that still remain on the topic. By helping graduates overcome licensure barriers, it is possible that more counselors will obtain professional licenses. As a result,

improvements may occur in the (a) quality of care provided to counseling clients and (b) career opportunities available to professional counselors.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

In completing the interviews, I met individually with most participants as well as a group of interns during supervision with their LPC-S. The interviews were held in a private location agreed upon by the participant and the researcher. The interviews were conducted using the interview protocol and are expected to last approximately 60 minutes. I used an audio recorder to record the interviews, which enabled the documentation of the dialogue and facilitate accurate interview transcription**.**

Motivation to Pursue Counseling

1. Describe to me what led you to pursuing a graduate degree in counseling? How did you choose your university?
2. What experiences have you had to help you choose a counseling career?
3. Describe your experience during your graduate internship.
4. Tell me about your supervision during your practicum? Where did that training take place?
5. What has been a rewarding experience as a counselor?
6. What would be your ideal counseling job?
7. Tell me about any professional organizations you are a member of?

Knowledge of Licensure Process

8. Tell me what your understanding was of the licensure process.
9. When you chose this profession, were you planning to become licensed? At what point did you decide not to pursue licensure (if it applies)
10. Do you know what types of agencies are looking to hire licensed counselors and non-licensed counselors? Are you familiar with the criteria for those open positions?

For Those Choosing Licensure:

11. If licensed, what was the motivation? _
12. Tell me about your preparation to become a licensed counselor?
13. What are the requirements to keep up your licensure?
14. Tell me if you are familiar with the credentialing process with insurance companies? Please describe.
15. What is the starting salary for an LPC-Intern vs LPC? Non-licensed master's-level counselor?
16. As a licensed counselor (for those that are) what suggestions or recommendations would you make to a counseling graduate student preparing for licensure?

For Those Not Choosing Licensure:

17. If not licensed, what has been the obstacles or barriers that has prevented you?
18. Describe any activities you engage in to stay current in your field (e.g., participating in continuing education, attending professional conferences, etc.).
19. Tell me if you are familiar with the credentialing process with insurance companies. Please describe.
20. What is the starting salary for an LPC-Intern vs LPC? Non-licensed master's-level counselor?

Skills

21. What counseling technique/s would describe how you treat clients? (Play therapy, trauma-focused, etc.)?
22. How do you determine a client's level of service? How do you choose what services they need? Describe any screening tools used?
23. How would you describe your work style? (e,g,, time management, documentation)
24. Based on your past work experience, how would you rate your decision-making skills towards pursuing this field? Share any examples…
25. Generally speaking; How do you sort through decisions that must be made in life?

Future Plans and Recommendations

26. Describe career advancement opportunities you would be seeking from an employer?
27. As a counselor, is there any ideas or suggestions you would make to a human resource professional about hiring someone with your skills?
28. If you were hiring a person for a counselor position, tell me what you would three things you would be looking for in that candidate.
29. Any suggestions for someone considering the counseling program?

Appendix B: Permission to Solicit Participants

Barbara Melton, Helping Professional Connect
Contact Information

February 8, 2017

Dear Stephanie,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled "Interviewing the Therapist" within the Helping Professionals Connect forum. As part of this study, I authorize you to post flyers on our website for recruitment purposes and data collection. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities include: Allowing qualified participants to view the recruitment flyer through your website. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the organization's policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the student's supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

_____, Director