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A Phenomenological Exploration of Beginning Counselor Educators' Experiences Developing a Research Agenda

Brandon J. Wilde

Adams State University, brandonjwilde@gmail.com

Stephen S. Feit

Idaho State University, feiststep@isu.edu

Laura K. Harrawood

McKendree University, lkharrawood@mckendree.edu

David M. Kleist

Idaho State University, kleidavi@isu.edu

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Abstract

Hermeneutic, phenomenological methodology was used to explore experiences developing a research agenda for five beginning counselor educators. Through in-depth, open-ended interviews, experiences included (a) balance, (b) isolation, and (c) evaluation while references to trusting relationships were manifest across all themes. Recommendations for counselor educators spanning the profession are provided.

Keywords

Research Agenda, Counselor Educators, Phenomenology

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A Phenomenological Exploration of Beginning Counselor Educators' Experiences Developing a Research Agenda

Brandon J. Wilde

Adams State University, Alamosa, Colorado, USA

Stephen S. Feit

Idaho State University, Pocatello, Idaho, USA

Laura K. Harrawood

McKendree University, Lebanon, Illinois, USA

David M. Kleist

Idaho State University, Pocatello, Idaho, USA

Hermeneutic, phenomenological methodology was used to explore experiences developing a research agenda for five beginning counselor educators. Through in-depth, open-ended interviews, experiences included (a) balance, (b) isolation, and (c) evaluation while references to trusting relationships were manifest across all themes. Recommendations for counselor educators spanning the profession are provided. Keywords: Research Agenda, Counselor Educators, Phenomenology.

Recent publication trends in counselor education literature surrounding the importance of research identity development and research competencies in counseling substantiates the need for in-depth research focused on how counselor educators become engaged scholars (see Wester & Borders, 2014). Specifically, there is a dearth of available literature that include experiences of beginning counselor educators developing a research agenda with relevant literature focused only on large scale populations of educators as they navigate their first years in the academy. While the topic of mentorship has emerged within recent counselor education literature (e.g., Borders et al., 2011; Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008; Magnuson, Norem, & Lonneman-Doroff, 2009), studies focused on counselor educators' specific accounts of developing a research agenda are needed to contribute to the existing body of literature that extend beyond mentoring of counselor educators. Therefore, research focusing on new counselor educators' experiences while developing a research agenda within the first two years of the faculty appointment is timely and appropriate and can ultimately provide emerging counselor educators with opportunities for clearly defined research activity that contributes to the needs of the academy, the profession, and society.

While existing literature focuses on the professional development of new assistant professors of counselor education and addresses broad aspects of faculty duties, there remains little published research of the experiences new counselor education faculty have engaging in scholarly activities during their first two years as an assistant professor (see Austin, 2002; Ramsey, Cavalaro, Kiselica, & Zila, 2002; Smaby, 1998, 1999). A gap in current literature beckons the profession to conduct research outlining how developing a research agenda contributes to advancing the profession and facilitates promotion and tenure. While Hill (2004) recommended pretenured faculty members work in collaboration with colleagues to normalize stress inherent in the development and generation of a research agenda, little has been published providing description of the experience associated with such a significant task for beginning counselor educators. Consequently, it is imperative for emerging counselor educators to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to develop a research agenda in order to facilitate their transition into faculty positions within the academy. As new faculty experience

multiple role demands and expectations to engage in scholarship early in their academic positions, the transition includes adjusting to common experiences of new counselor educators.

Reviews of experiences shared by new assistant professors of counselor education indicate struggles associated with adjusting to the demands of being a faculty member during their first year (see Borders et al., 2011, Conway, 2006; Magnuson, 2002; Magnuson et al., 2003; Magnuson, Norem, & Lonneman-Doroff, 2009; Magnuson, Shaw, Tubin, & Norem, 2004; Niles, Akos, & Cutler, 2001) these studies lacked specific aspects of new faculty struggles and did not include detailed description of the experience of developing a research agenda during the first two years of the faculty appointment. Additionally, the challenges inherent in developing a productive research agenda indicates further attention to scholarly research preparation be given at the doctoral level and the conversation be opened to include the accounts of new faculty while developing a productive research agenda.

The purpose of this study was to understand beginning counselor educator experiences of developing a research agenda by providing thick description of the prevalent experiences across the first two years of the faculty appointment. A qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to “describe the depth and meaning” (Hays & Wood, 2011, p. 291) of living the experience of developing a research agenda for beginning counselor educators. The philosophical, phenomenological principles of van Manen (1990) are rooted in the study of the life world, or the world as experienced rather than conceptualized, categorized, or theorized and is embedded within a constructivist paradigm of qualitative inquiry. To understand the experience and the meaning participants give to their lived experience of developing a research agenda, the following research question was addressed: What are beginning counselor educators’ experiences developing a research agenda?

Method

The aim of phenomenology is to understand lived experience through insight that can bring one in more direct contact with the world through deep description of the meaning of lived experience (Hays & Wood, 2011). The hermeneutic orientation in phenomenological philosophy as outlined by Max van Manen posits “anything that presents itself to consciousness is potentially of interest to phenomenology, whether the object is real or imagined, empirically measurable, or subjectively felt” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). Subsequently, the conversion of spoken language into written text is the means by which essences are understood. van Manen’s (1990) hermeneutic phenomenology was used to guide my interpretation and describe the meaning of the lived experience of developing a research agenda for beginning counselor educators within the first two years of their faculty position.

Researcher’s Philosophy Toward Inquiry

Hermeneutics is strongly influenced by context, as interpretation occurs when meaning is constructed within the context of each person's existence (Koch, 1996). Hermeneutic phenomenology allows for the researcher to include one’s experience as an essential part of the research process. In remaining consistent with this approach, while acting as a primary instrument of interpretation, I included an explication of assumptions and biases as part of turning to the nature of the lived experience of developing a research agenda for five beginning counselor educators. The methods used positioned me to “establish a strong relation” (van Manen, 1990, p. 33) with the research question and the phenomenon. Additionally, the methods used ensured that my assumptions were accounted for through

multiple verification procedures and that it was necessary that I did not take a scientific "step away from " the research, but became an integral part of the inquiry. This study received Institutional Review Board authorization to ensure ethical and confidential procedures for protecting identifying information of participants.

Participants

Using purposeful selection procedures (Maxwell, 2013), five participants were selected from across the five geographical regions of the *Association for Counselor Education and Supervision* (ACES) based on voluntary responses from the *New Faculty Interest Network* (NFIN) email listserv request. At the time of the study, all participants had earned doctorates in Counselor Education and Supervision from doctoral programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP) and were within the first two years of their first faculty appointment. Participants were employed in tenure track, CACREP-accredited counselor education programs situated within universities with representation from the following Carnegie Classifications (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, n.d.): RU/VH: Research Universities (very high research activity); RU/H: Research Universities (high research activity); Master's L: Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs). Four of the participants identified as female and one participant identified as male. Ages of participants ranged from mid 20s to late 30s.

Verification Procedures

Creswell (2013) outlined standards to ensure accuracy in the written account of lived experience. These standards follow the postmodern approach to phenomenological research that guided this study and include credibility, authenticity, criticality, and integrity. I included the additional concept of *crystallization* (Richardson, 2000) to verify the validity of the written accounts of participants from multiple sources.

This inquiry utilized several verification procedures to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, including the use of thick, rich description through detailed participant quotations. In addition, I used multiple sources of data including interview transcripts, my own reflexive memos, as well as the inclusion of two focus groups where participants reviewed essential themes and their respective sub-themes as a member check procedure (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I also used peer debriefing to further discuss the findings from each round of analysis. The focus groups served as an added measure of assurance that each of the themes and sub-themes accounted for the participants' diversity of opinions and that remaining data did not provide new information about their experience (Mason, 2010). The verification procedures provide the reader the opportunity to personally interpret the results and distinguish the transferability and credibility of the findings.

Data Collection

I conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews asking each of the participants the following questions: (a) What is your experience developing a research agenda and (b) How are you affected by this experience? In harmony with phenomenological philosophy, additional probing questions were asked to further expand on participant accounts of their experience. The probing questions provided clarification and additional detail and description to capture the meaning of their experience as they related to the original research question. The interviews and subsequent focus group each lasted 45-60 minutes and were transcribed

to include participant words verbatim for later hermeneutic analysis. Data from my personal memo responses to participant interviews and subsequent reflections were also included in the analysis. The second author served as an external auditor during the analysis and interpretation procedures.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed and interpreted using hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990) and further analyzed for themes that “may be understood as the structures of experience” (p. 79) to highlight participant situation and discover the meaning that resulted from analysis. Uncovering the “knots in the webs” (van Manen, 1990, p. 90) of participant experiences through theme identification are a necessary part of the analysis procedure and capture only part of the phenomenon. Embarking on this process of “mining meaning” (van Manen, 1990, p. 86) was an important procedure in determining *essential* themes to account for the underlying features that make the experience what it really is. The essential themes from the first round interviews provided a reference for guiding the second hermeneutic interview conversation and allowed for dialogue between participants and myself. This evolved into a co-constructed exploration of the phenomenon ensuring the original phenomenological question was kept in mind. The resulting *essential* themes continued to guide the hermeneutic dialog surrounding the lived experience of developing a research agenda with participants’ verification and refinement of these “aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is” (van Manen, 1990, p. 107) with participants confirming the accuracy of the resulting essential themes during the focus group discussions.

Results

The beginning counselor educators in this study described their experience of developing a research agenda as a complex interpersonal process. Three main themes were identified from the first round data analysis that are representative of essential aspects of participants’ experiences. Through each participant account, essential themes were interwoven across their experiences. Participant one described part of her experience requiring her to “balance myself while juggling everything works together synergistically. It’s as if there’s an art to being a good faculty member, just as there’s an art to being a good counselor. I just don’t recognize it within myself.” The perspectives identified were seen as individual parts of the whole phenomena necessary to adequately describe the complete experience.

The description of the lived experience of developing a research agenda was a synergy between Isolation, Evaluation, and Balance. These themes are essential as I could not “imaginatively change or delete” (van Manen, 1990, p. 107) them without diminishing the whole of the experience. The three themes also included sub-themes that substantiate the participants’ experience of isolation, evaluation and balance. The sub-themes of isolation included *from colleagues* and *from others*, while a sub-theme from evaluation included *self-doubt*, and sub-themes for balance were *professional goals* and *personal goals* (see Appendix A).

Experiences With Isolation

The theme, isolation, was confirmed and described in detail through the participants’ narrative accounts. Also, additional confirmation of the sub-themes, *from colleagues* and *from others*, added to the understanding of participant experiences with isolation. As

participants described the experience of isolation, they provided further evidence of the context in which they experienced isolation in the following two subthemes.

Subtheme 1.1: From colleagues. The adjustment to a new department environment does not include formalized collegial relationships between new faculty members and existing members. However, all participants indicated their new position included hours spent working alone and without guidance. Participant accounts described the “disconnect and abandonment from people [I] care about, my partner, even my colleagues” that they felt while they adjusted to the role demands and perceived expectations for “productively demonstrating that I can make contributions” to the profession and to their department through publications and/or volunteering for tasks in the department. Participants assumed they were “expected to take on so many extra tasks that are not part of the research agenda...but have to be done in the department, it’s like I have to have multiple irons in the fire.” This accounted for participants experiencing a lack of support around the expectations of conducting research while also writing and or submitting manuscripts for publication. One participant stated:

I think that I have to prove myself to my department members as being someone who can pull their own weight around here. Everyone feels it...the expectation to publish, and to publish in top-tier journals, the ones that only certain people get published in. And that is supposed to happen on my own time. It feels like I am always having to look for people to work with.

Subtheme 1.2: From others. Participants described the experience of loneliness associated with working late nights and weekends and being in their department when it “seemed as if no one was around to observe” the work they were engaging in, to include personal/non-collegial relationships. The isolation from others was suggested when one participant stated:

the way my [partner] would ask me why I had to be gone so much, and I would simply tell them that I had so much work to do, that I didn’t really know where to start...so they would smile at me with a look of confusion that I often shared but couldn’t talk to [them] about because there was just no way to explain it.

Experiences With Evaluation

The theme, evaluation, was confirmed and described through participant reflections of self as a department member expected to engage in research and produce scholarship that was continuously measured but only evidenced by publication in peer-reviewed journals. Confirmation of the sub-theme *self-doubt* added to understanding the experience of evaluation for participants. As participants expanded on their experience of evaluation, they provided further evidence of the manner in which they experienced evaluation.

Subtheme 2.1: Self-doubt. Beginning counselor educators transitioning as engaged scholars, educators, and supervisors often face multiple role demands while also needing to manage personal responsibilities. Participant accounts included continual reflection on their “ability to be good at research” that could only be measured by publication in journals. These publications would be recognized as part of their evaluation and retention procedures and documented in their professional dossier. Participants often commented on “how will I ever get publications...when I am trying to learn how to be a contributing department member?”

This sub-theme indicated ongoing questioning of their competence as determined internally and lead to further evaluation of competence in relation to those they worked with.

While current peer-reviewed publication procedures can span beyond several months for manuscript submission to manuscript publication, participants indicated feeling “stuck behind the eight-ball.” One participant reflected on this when she said:

I am always attempting to play catch up just to prove that I am actually working on publishing. So I talk about the feedback I receive from reviewers and try not to come across as needy, or incapable, so I don't let anyone know that I feel like doing all of this is completely over my head.

Self-doubt was a significant sub-theme as all participants indicated times when competence-based comments were supportive. As a result their ambition increased and they were able to make more time to write for publication because they could do anything if they sensed support and compassion from colleagues.

Experiences with Balance

The theme, balance, was confirmed and described through participants' narrative accounts of managing their development as faculty members. Confirmation of subthemes, *professional goals* and *personal goals* added to the understanding of the context in which the participants experienced balance. Participants' descriptions of their experience of balance offered meaningful perspective of the impact that balance has on new counselor educators as they navigate their role as researchers within their initial faculty appointment.

Subtheme 3.1: Professional goals. As participants reflected on their confidence as researchers, they suggested a range of perspectives pertaining to their professional goals as new faculty members. “Getting my priorities straight” was a common phrase that was shared by participants during individual interviews and the focus groups. I noted in my own journal the following comment that is reflective of my focus at the time and my own self-doubt:

What about your wellness? How do you do everything that must be done and still meet the demands of publication requirements? I can't imagine being at a Very High Research University and also be expected to publish three or four times per year, I'm glad I'm a doc student and don't have to do that...yet.

Further exploration of this sub-theme revealed that each department is unique in the expectations that are placed on new faculty members to engage in scholarship as a priority, or to balance this with equal focus placed on teaching excellence and service. The shared experience of balance was further illuminated as all participants confirmed during the focus groups they “are not as worried about teaching responsibilities and service to the institution and community” because those opportunities were included in their doctoral training and they are easy to be involved in. However, participants also confirmed a desire to have had more doctoral training and emphasis on scholarship and publication. One participant indicated “I wrote a dissertation and literature reviews for my faculty in my doc program, but that helped them more than it helped me.”

Subtheme 3.2: Personal goals. As participant accounts included a focus on professional goals, additional reflections from participants also highlighted the need to balance these goals with their personal life. Specifically, participants reflected on their goals to “get to a point where” their focus on research was balanced with personal goals to increase skill and confidence in the area of scholarship. In addition, participants included comments

suggesting their own personal goals were being overshadowed by professional goals and were in direct conflict with the goal of being a balanced professional and maintaining a wellness perspective. The following participant statement is essential in understanding the experience of balance, both personally, and professionally.

I just look back and see my scale tipped heavily toward my work and I see it negatively impacting my personal life I have to put a stop to that so that my life can be balanced and I can feel healthy in my work and my personal life.

Experiences with Trusting Relationships as a Central Phenomenon

Thematic analysis from the second round of interviews confirmed the essential themes from the first round of interviews and further identified the central theme to each participant's experience as *trusting relationships*. Participants described *trusting relationships* as a central phenomenon that influenced the themes of *isolation*, *evaluation*, and *balance* and described the meaning associated with developing their personal research agenda in isolation. All participants recalled times when they were supported by colleagues and as a result felt competent to conduct research that resulted in something tangible (e.g., publication, grant proposals). The following statements are representative of participant accounts of *trusting relationships* and the confluence of *isolation*, *evaluation* and *balance* across the experience of developing a research agenda. *Note: pseudonyms were used to ensure participant confidentiality.*

Rachel: It [research collaboration] speaks to a level of trust that's there and then it occurred to me, even though we are not in the same discipline necessarily, doesn't mean we can't collaborate professionally. That's helped a lot actually with the isolation piece; at times I would love to have one individual in my department that I could collaborate with but building stronger trust with others that has definitely helped me feel confident and grounded.

Diana: When you start as a new faculty you lose your contacts with all of the people that you were working with and know [in the doctoral program] at least in a physical sense and then we just drift apart. It's like a whole new environment, all new resources, and so I wonder who do I even call? It's like starting from scratch in finding those I can even connect with personally and professionally.

Nigel: I may have confidence and send something out for publication and I get it back and that [confidence] can be shattered by their perceptions of my competence, and yet I don't even know who they are. But what they say in their feedback can hit pretty hard because it isn't very supportive. But when someone you know gives you that feedback, it is not as difficult to get up and try again... and again.

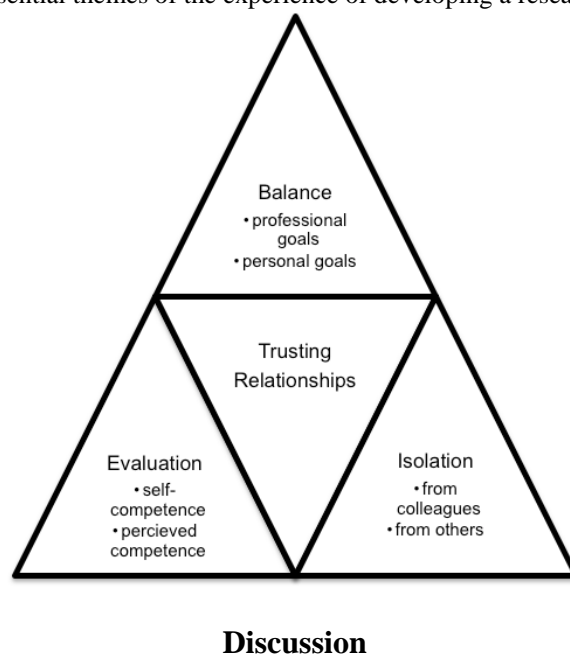
Cathy: Trying to still be connected with the people in your professional life and your personal life; with my baby, my partner, my department chair; it is something that I think is a very important part of it all. So learning how to find that balance, but then having time to invest in those relationships is what really kept me going. It's still connecting with that isolation component that it seems that there's hope for relationships with people, my colleagues and my family, and that I can trust my relationship with them to really play a part in how confident I am.

Natasha: It's hard to engage [other colleagues]. I was at a meeting and I had an idea for a research piece – and I'm sitting next to one of my colleagues – it

was in a mixed group – and I would have loved to be able to turn to her and pitch my idea and just have that stimulation. But I am new around here. I don't know who this person is, so I don't believe that she would be responsive. So I didn't say anything and went back to my office and worked alone.

The theme of Trusting Relationships is reflective of the potential influence feeling connected with others personally and professionally has on the experience of developing a research agenda. Participants experienced trusting relationships within their unique context and subsequent description allowed for deeper understanding of the experience of developing a research agenda. One participant described his experience as having a “pulse” with the themes flowing across and between aspects of the experience. Figure 1 represents participant experiences developing a research agenda and includes the essential themes of isolation, evaluation, balance and the central theme of trusting relationships, along with the respective sub-themes (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. The central and essential themes of the experience of developing a research agenda



It is essential to emphasize the purpose of phenomenological inquiry and illuminate the potential implications that may be drawn from this study. My purpose and rationale for selecting hermeneutic phenomenology was to “transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence” (van Manen, 1990, p. 36) through description of the lived quality and significance of the experience of developing a research agenda for beginning counselor educators. My intention was to offer an opportunity for beginning counselor educators to discuss their experiences developing a research agenda and provide readers “a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful” (van Manen, 1990, p. 36). This discussion can be used to inform mentoring relationships between new faculty members and mentors to facilitate the transition from doctoral student to faculty member, with particular focus on navigating the experience of developing a research agenda.

The descriptive narratives of these five counselor educators presented the complex process associated with developing and strengthening an active research agenda. Rich textual description of the three themes of isolation, evaluation, and balance were vital in providing further depth and understanding of the central theme of trusting relationships as an integral component of the experience.

Regarding *trusting relationships* (central theme), participants identified the importance of meaningful connections with colleagues that provided further opportunity to recognize the interplay of their experiences with isolation, evaluation, and balance (essential themes). Furthermore, these experiences provided opportunity for trusting relationships to emerge as central to the experience of developing a research agenda. Prior studies have indicated that assistant professors of counselor education who are more satisfied and successful were those who received program faculty support, mentoring, and collegiality to include “total trust” in the context of relationships (Magnuson, Norem, & Lonneman-Doroff, 2009, p. 61). This is consistent with the central theme of trusting relationships in the experience of developing a research agenda for participants in the current study.

Indeed, I do not assume that the described experiences for the participants in this study hold the same meaning for other beginning counselor educators. I cannot predict that these experiences will parallel the experiences of beginning counselor educators in years to come, and I recognize the potential limitations of this study, but I do not attest such limitations were a threat to the integrity of the study.

Transferability of Results

Qualitative research is not generalizable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), therefore the findings from this study need to be examined for transferability to the readers’ unique situation and furthermore, the applicability of the results to their contexts (Morrow, 2005). It was my task as the primary researcher to present the findings from the study in a “clear and concise manner so that the readers can interpret for themselves how participants made meaning of the phenomenon being explored” (Hunt, 2011, p. 299). As participants were situated in university settings representing Carnegie Classifications (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, n.d.) ranging from “Very High Research Activity” to teaching focused institutions, readers are invited to apply the results from these participant accounts to their own context.

The implications of this study should be examined within the context of the limitations of the study. One limitation of the study is that participants’ ages ranged from mid 20s to late 30s. The results may not describe the experiences of beginning counselor educators of additional age ranges. Participants were sampled based on the time frame in which they were situated in their initial faculty appointments ranging six to 18 months. Therefore, the results may not describe the accounts for new faculty members who have had multiple faculty appointments and should not be considered applicable to all pre-tenured faculty members in any counselor education program.

Implications for Counselor Educators

A current definition of “research agenda” within the field of counselor education is lacking, while existing education literature defining “scholarship” and “research” are inconsistent across various studies (Austin, 2002; Ramsey, Cavalaro, Kiselica, & Zila, 2002; Smaby, 1998, 1999). Consequently, counselor educators engaging in the process of developing a research agenda struggle to engage in scholarship that is imperative for emerging counselor educators to facilitate their transition into faculty positions within the academy and to ultimately contribute to effective counseling practice. Thus, the ethical implications for counselor educators to engage in research and scholarship are far reaching and must contribute to the overall growth and development of the counseling profession and ultimately “lead to a healthy and more just society” (ACA, 2014, p. 15).

Recommendations for Additional Research

As new faculty experience the multiple role demands and the expectations to engage in scholarship while early in their academic positions, the transition includes adjusting to the stress commonly experienced by new counselor educators. Despite successful dissertation completion, reviews of experiences shared by new assistant professors of counselor education indicate significant struggle during their first year to develop a research agenda (Conway, 2006; Magnuson, 2002; Magnuson et al., 2003; Magnuson, Shaw, Tubin, & Norem, 2004; Niles, Akos, & Cutler, 2001). However, a global definition of a research agenda is yet to be clearly defined in counselor education literature, and may contribute to counselor educators' struggle to identify a programmatic line of inquiry leading to a productive research agenda.

Studies specific to higher education indicate a call has been extended to include a range of scholarly activity and must be considered in the faculty review process including those conducted specific to counselor educators (e.g., Conway, 2006; Ramsey et al., 2002; Sorcinelli et al., 2006). Zimpfer, Mohdzain, West, and Bubenzer (1992) indicate that clearly defined criteria used to determine counselor education faculty recruitment, promotion, tenure, rank, and salary is vital for the counseling profession to achieve recognition as a profession distinct from counseling psychology. Additional research is needed to account for strategies used by counselor educator scholars to mentor emerging counselor educators as engaged scholars.

Conclusion

Members of the counseling profession must continue to place emphasis on the importance of moving toward evidence-based practice through advanced knowledge and skill in the production and consumption of counseling-related research. Counselor educators have significant responsibility in their academic roles to actively engage in the pursuit of knowledge through research and scholarship in order to contribute to the growth and development of the counseling profession as well as for promotion and tenure purposes. It is necessary to further understand how to strengthen neophyte counselor educators as productive researchers from early in their academic careers and even in their doctoral studies. The central theme of trusting relationships in conjunction with the essential themes of isolation, evaluation, and balance that emerged from this study support the call for additional research and further training regarding new counselor educators' engagement in scholarly inquiry as they develop an active research agenda. As counselor educators advocate for a more clear definition of a research agenda, additional focus should be placed on strengthening our identity as researchers and advocating for a unified understanding of research and scholarship. Counselor educators must also continue to increase their knowledge and skill across multiple scholarship arenas to strengthen and substantiate our identity as researchers as we extend the knowledge base of the counseling profession.

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Appendix A

Central, Essential and Sub-themes of Beginning Counselor Educators' Experiences Developing a Research Agenda.

Central Theme: Trusting Relationships

Essential Theme 1: Isolation

Sub-Themes:

1.1 From colleagues

1.2 From others

Essential Theme 2: Evaluation

Sub-Themes:

2.1 Self-competence

2.2 Perceived competence

Essential Theme 3: Balance

Sub-Themes:

3.1 Professional goals

3.2 Personal goals

Author Note

Brandon Wilde, Ph.D., LPC, NCC is a graduate of Idaho State University and is currently the director of the PhD program in Counselor Education and Supervision at Adams State University. Dr. Wilde has published in the *Family Journal*, *Counseling and Values*, and *The Practitioner Scholar*. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: Brandon J. Wilde at, brandonjwilde@gmail.com.

Stephen S. Feit is Professor Emeritus of Counseling from Idaho State University. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: Stephen S. Feit at, feitstep@isu.edu.

Laura K. Harrawood, Ph.D., LCPC, LMFT, is an associate professor and internship coordinator at McKendree University Professional Counseling Program where she teaches courses in counseling theory, ethics, research design, couple and family counseling, and grief and loss. Dr. Harrawood has published in the area of family, death education, ethics, and the training of couple and family counselors. She currently serves on the editorial review board for *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Family* and has served as a manuscript reviewer for *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying*. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: Laura K. Harrawood at, lkharrawood@mckendree.edu.

David M. Kleist is a full professor, and chairperson, in the Department of Counseling at Idaho State University. He received his Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision at Southern Illinois University in 1995. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: David M. Kleist at, kleidavi@isu.edu.

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