

2021

## Surviving the rollercoaster: The professional identity development of Latinx doctoral students in counseling

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### Recommended Citation

Locke, A. F. (2021). Surviving the rollercoaster: The professional identity development of Latinx doctoral students in counseling. *The Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, 14(2). Retrieved from <https://repository.wcsu.edu/jcps/vol14/iss2/9>

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## Surviving the rollercoaster: The professional identity development of Latinx doctoral students in counseling

### Abstract

This qualitative study applies Latino Critical Race theory to understand the professional identity development of eight Latinx doctoral students in counseling. The three themes: being one of the few, navigating professional identity, and becoming a counselor educator, depict how they persisted despite racialized experiences. The metaphor of a rollercoaster captures their experience of resistance and disruption to the norm. Implications for counselor educators and counseling programs are provided. These are aimed at creating an anti-racist profession that is inclusive of all students.

*Keywords:* professional identity, Latinx doctoral students, counselor education, racism, Latino Critical Race Theory

### Keywords

professional identity, Latinx doctoral students, counselor education

### Author's Notes

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The counseling profession is predominantly White, with more than 75% of counselor educators and 60% of graduate students identifying with this racial group (CACREP, 2015). As such, the field upholds largely White values: such as individualism, linear thinking, and meritocracy (Gerig, 2014; Katz, 1985). The current research on professional identity development reflects these values as they describe an individualized, linear process based on merit. These models failed to explore the role of race or ethnicity, and how these identities intersect within a White professional and educational context (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Gibson et al., 2010; Moss et al., 2014; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). However, according to Critical Race Theory (CRT), all educational experiences are racialized, therefore race and ethnicity must be considered in the professional identity development of students-of-color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Valdes, 2005).

Latino Critical Race theory (LatCrit) was used in this study to understand the role of race and ethnicity in the participants' professional identity development (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). LatCrit is a framework from which to deconstruct and problematize dominant understandings of a topic from a racial lens (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), in this case - professional identity development in counseling programs.

The Latinx population was chosen because they are the fastest growing ethnic group in the U.S. (U.S. Census, 2011) and have the potential to make up a third of future student bodies in higher education and to join the ranks of academia (Gloria et al., 2006). Also, almost 8% of master's level counseling students, about 6% of doctoral level students, and 10% of professional counselors identified as ethnically Latinx (CACREP, 2016; Robinson et al., 2009). The term Latinx is the current gender-neutral term used by this cultural group (Steinmetz, 2018).

Given the rising diversity within the counseling profession and in the U.S., a more diverse understanding that accounts for race and ethnicity of professional identity development is needed (Haskins & Singh, 2015). This knowledge is vital in effectively teaching, supervising, and mentoring students in manners that promote a strong sense of professional identity and can retain students-of-color who can later become faculty-of-color (Baggerly et al., 2017). The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of eight Latinx doctoral students navigating professional identity development within the predominantly White counseling profession. Following a review of the literature, the methods and findings will be provided; and the metaphor of the rollercoaster will be discussed. The article concludes with implications for counselor education on ways to provide inclusive learning environments to retain students-of-color.

## **Literature Review**

### **Professional Identity Development in Counseling Programs**

Developing a professional identity involves an evolution and integration of the multiple parts of being a counselor, doctoral student, and counselor educator (Adkinson-Bradley, 2013; Carlson et al., 2006, 2006; Dollarhide et al., 2013; Goodrich et al., 2011; Limberg et al., 2013). Multiple studies explored how master's and doctoral students develop a professional identity in counseling. Overall, these studies showed a fairly linear process of development devoid of racial and/or cultural influences.

For example, Dollarhide et al. (2013) developed a professional identity model that involved a three-stage growth process that began when the student entered the program, continued throughout the doctoral academic period, and ended when the student identified as a new counselor educator (Dollarhide et al., 2013). Within each of these stages, the student

engaged in three specific tasks: a) integrating multiple professional identities, b) building internal legitimacy as a counselor educator, and c) accepting responsibility as a leader in the profession (Dollarhide et al., 2013). Students move from a dependence on external validation to a sense of internal validation and legitimacy. This study expanded on earlier research that also described a linear professional identity developmental process (Gibson et al., 2010; Moss et al., 2014; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Further, Carlson et al. (2006) described a conceptual model that involved seven key professional areas: (a) program expectations, (b) teaching and supervision, (c) research, (d) publications, (e) grants and funding, (f) service, and (g) conferences, networking, and professional development. This model emphasized the role of the student engaging in these tasks.

The commonality of these models reflected a fairly linear process, wherein a student enters a program, engages in activities, and exits as a professional. One major limitation was that the sample populations were majority White and did not capture the experiences of students from other ethnic and racial backgrounds, such as Latinx students. Yet, relevant research on the higher education experiences of Latinx students and students of color suggest that race and ethnicity play a major role.

### **Latinx Students in Counselor Education and Higher Education**

Research shows that Latinx students face racialized encounters that can lead to psychological, relational, and identity consequences (Gloria & Castellanos, 2006; Gonzalez et al., 2001; Lineros & Hinojosa, 2013; Rosales, 2006; Torres, 2006). These experiences can lead to high dropout rates and self-doubt (Gasman et al., 2008; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Gonzalez, 2006; Henfield et al., 2013; Vaquera, 2007). For instance, Gonzalez et al. (2001) found that

participants felt guilty and confused for engaging in the White world of academia because of the cultural conflicts created as a Latinx student.

Students endured and coped with dissonance which distracted them from other academic pursuits (Gloria & Castellanos, 2006), thus making their academic experience a fragile and vulnerable one (Gonzalez et al., 2001). Further, despite being accepted as a student, many students simultaneously felt like outsiders due to their race and ethnicity (Gonzalez et al., 2001). This sense of marginalization led to contradictory experiences within academia. For instance, ethnicity, which is the first identity by which Latinx are often judged (Torres et al., 2011), is also the first aspect that is denied, ignored, and invalidated (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Rapp, 2010). As one Latinx student stated, “I am halfway. I am an academic. I am Latina. They are comfortable with one half and that lets them ignore the other” (Gonzalez et al., 2004, p. 572).

Latinx and students of color often reported experiencing a lack of academic, professional, and social support from faculty and peers (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Gonzalez et al., 2002; Gonzalez, 2006; Watford et al., 2006) leading many of them to feel disrespected, stifled, and tokenized as students of color (Flores Niemann, 1999; Gonzalez, 2006). Also, Latinx students experienced cultural tension between academia, that tended to emphasize individuality, independence, and competition; and the collectivistic values inherent in their ethnic cultural group (Gonzalez et al., 2002; Rosales, 2006; Wiedman et al., 2003). Some of these values are: familismo and personalismo.

Familismo refers to a preference for close connection to family, and emphasizes interdependence, cohesiveness, and cooperation amongst family members (Santiago-Rivera et al., 2002). Personalismo or valuing and building interpersonal relationships is a part of the

collectivistic worldview of the Latinx culture, making positive interpersonal and social skills valued (Santiago-Rivera et al., 2002). Nelson and Jackson (2003) in their qualitative study of eight Hispanic counseling interns, noticed that they frequently used the words *teamwork* and *support* emphasizing that relationship was vital to their experiences.

Research on the experiences of Latinx graduate students living in the margins in the academy show that race and ethnicity play a significant role in how they develop and function in predominantly White settings (Estrada et al., 2004). Given that Casado Perez and Carney (2018) depicted the insidious nature of institutional oppression in the experiences of counselor educators, it is likely that Latinx doctoral counseling students share similar racialized experiences that influence their professional identity development. The research question was: What are the experiences of Latinx doctoral students in predominantly White counseling programs regarding their professional identity development?

### **Method**

Basic qualitative method was employed to gain in-depth knowledge of the research question. Qualitative research uses interviews to gain rich and descriptive information about a topic of interest (Merriam, 2015). The topic of interest for this study was the professional identity development experiences of Latinx doctoral students. Before the research design is explained, the researcher's stance and trustworthiness strategies will be explained.

### **Researcher's Stance**

The researcher is a Latina counselor educator, who was a doctoral candidate when this study was conducted making her an "insider", or participant of the population being studied (Suzuki et al., 2005; Villenas, 1996). Due to this insider knowledge, the researcher established prolonged engagement (which is a trustworthiness procedure) with the participants by knowing

the professional culture (Hays & Singh, 2012). From this positionality, she interacted with the participants and interpreted the data based on her social location and took active steps to address possible bias (Hays & Singh, 2012). Some of this bias included that racialized experiences in educational settings will be influential in the students' professional identity development; and that the students' ethnicity will also play a vital role.

### ***Trustworthiness***

To establish credibility, transferability, confirmability, and ethical validation (Hays & Singh, 2012) of her findings, this researcher engaged in six trustworthiness procedures. One strategy was taking numerous breaks while coding to process and/or journal emotional reactions to the data. In so doing, the researcher embraced her subjectivities to more accurately observe the participants' lived experiences and increased the study's credibility and confirmability. Debriefing with her dissertation chair and peer reviewer (who was an Italian, German, Jewish female, doctoral student in counseling), also helped the researcher process emotions and decipher between the participants' experiences from her biases; further supporting the study's credibility, confirmability, and ethical validation (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Performing member checks was another method used to check for accuracy of interpretations to increase confirmability. Keeping a reflective journal aided the researcher in cataloging her cognitive and emotional reactions throughout the analysis process (Blythe et al., 2013; Merriam, 2002). Journaling aided in the ethical validation, credibility and transferability of the study. Lastly, by interviewing multiple individuals, triangulation of data sources was achieved, which substantiated the study's trustworthiness (Hays & Singh, 2012). Next, the research method will be described.

### **Sampling Procedure**



After receiving institutional review board approval, participants were recruited through personal connection, word of mouth, and emails, through the snowballing technique (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Purposeful selection procedure was used to ensure that the participants shared similar characteristics and were engaged in the phenomenon being studied (Kuzel, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The selection criteria were: (1) self-identify as Latinx (can belong to any gender), (2) currently enrolled or recent graduate (within 6 months) in a doctoral program in counseling, counselor education and supervision, or counseling related field, and (3) the doctoral program was located in a predominantly White institution in the U.S. (meaning that more than 50% of the student body is White) and meets the CACREP definition of counselor education identity, as indicated by the participants' self-report.

Participants were recruited at various professional organization conferences, including the American Counseling Association and the National Latinx Psychological Association, where many Latinx counselors frequently attend. 25 potential participants were sent an email to partake in the study (with the screening tool that assessed their eligibility based on the selection criteria); eight responded. Given that this was a qualitative study, the small sample size of eight was sufficient (Hays & Singh, 2012).

### ***Participants' Demographics***

The mean age of the participants was 32.5 years and the range was 25-43 years old. Two identified as male, the others as female, six identified as heterosexual, one identified as bisexual, and one identified as queer. Five self-identified as racially Hispanic or Latinx, one as White, one as Native Caribbean/Black and one as indigenous/mixed. Ethnically, two identified as Puerto Rican, one of Caribbean island descent, three as Mexican and Puerto Rican, and two as South American. Six of the eight participants completed at least seven semesters of their

doctoral program, one finished four semesters, and one graduated within six months of the study. Since most participants had long term experience in the doctoral program, the data collected reflected a longitudinal perspective on the phenomenon. Researcher chosen pseudonyms were used to maintain the anonymity of the participants.

### ***Data Collection***

The eight participants were emailed to set up their first interview date. Before this first interview, the participants were given an online demographic questionnaire and the informed consent to read, sign, and scan back to the researcher. Once these two documents were collected, the data collection began. This stage lasted for about three months.

### ***Instruments***

Based on LatCrit, multiple identities play a role in educational experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001); therefore, the demographic interview included questions regarding gender, age, years in the U.S., birthplace, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, SES, languages spoken in addition to English, first language, and first-generation status. These questions were answered in open text boxes to allow the participant to self-identify. For the purposes of this article and to maintain anonymity only some identities, gender, sexual orientation, age, race, and ethnicity, were provided in the demographic description of the sample.

Three interviews and regular email contact were conducted to produce enough data to generate a comprehensive description, and to establish credibility by having sufficient interaction with the participants (Merriam, 2015). The first two interviews lasted for about 45 – 60 minutes, and the last one lasted about 30 minutes. The email correspondence between

interviews served as member checks on the preliminary themes because the participants reviewed the researcher's findings based on their transcripts.

The semi-structured interviews included open-ended questions that were formulated based on the research question and LatCrit perspectives on power and privilege (Hays & Singh, 2012). The first interview explored the research question: what are the experiences of Latinx doctoral students in counseling programs regarding their professional identity development? Sample questions were, "what brought you to pursue a doctorate in counseling?", "describe the role of ethnicity in your professional identity development," and "how have you navigated the interplay between your personal and professional identities as a doctoral student?" As a semi-structured interview, the researcher followed the interviewee's lead by asking further probing questions (impromptu) to elaborate on a given response. As a result, the first interview generated thick descriptions of their experiences.

The second interview focused on clarification, building insight, and exploring the influence of marginalizing situations (Merriam, 2015). For example, participants were asked to clarify the interaction between their ethnicity and professional identity. They were also asked to clarify poignant statements, and to give specific professional identity development examples. In the third interview, more elaboration was sought, and member checks were done by asking the participants whether the assigned themes (sent via email before this interview) captured the meaning of their stories (Blythe et al., 2013).

### ***Data Analysis***

Since the participants were invited to speak in Spanish, a bilingual (English/Spanish) transcriptionist transcribed the interviews. Analysis began after the first transcript was uploaded into the shared Dropbox folder (that the researcher and transcriber shared). The researcher

coded each relevant line in the transcript based on principles described by Saldaña (2009) and Merriam (2009). As the other interviews were conducted and the transcripts uploaded, coding continued.

A code book was created in an electronic excel sheet that included columns for each code and rows for each participant. By reviewing this excel sheet, the researcher was able to determine saturation by eliminating redundancies and discovered commonalities across participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A process of constant comparison or a cycling back and forth between the codes of each transcript was conducted to ensure that novel interpretations were supported, comprehensive, and substantiated (Hays & Wood, 2011). As codes emerged into categories, themes were generated.

At first, seven themes were created, which were condensed into three main themes (with each theme having multiple subthemes). For example, most of the participants shared an experience of “being othered”, “silenced” or “invisible”, these codes were clumped into the theme: “being one of the few”. Applying the LatCrit perspective during analysis, this theme was conceptualized as an example of being marginalized and not as a psychological feeling of isolation. During the second and third interviews, these themes were checked by the participants for accuracy. None of the themes were changed; however, the conceptualization of this process changed from a collective story of experiences to a collective counterstory of resistance and disruption to the norm.

## **Findings**

### **Being One of the Few**

Being “one of the few” captured the participants’ experiences of isolation and marginalization within their doctoral program and within the counseling profession. The two

subthemes of this category were: (a) experiencing microaggressions and (b) biopsychosocial outcomes.

As a part of a predominantly White student body, being one of the few meant, as Aryanna said, “at times it can be tricky because sometimes I’m othered.” Being “othered” meant that Aryanna and the other participants were tokenized and/or, as Marisol described, “a part of that check mark” or “box” that Latinos are placed. As Aryanna said, “[my ethnicity is] always at the forefront” of my experience and “in my face all the time.” For the participants, being one of the few led to various professional identity development experiences, in the form of microaggressions, in all areas of the doctoral program: (a) teaching, (b) supervision, (c) research and scholarship, (d) counseling, and (e) leadership and advocacy (CACREP, 2016).

### ***Teaching***

The participants in this study shared both positive and invalidating teaching experiences during their doctoral program. Raquel shared a positive experience: “the professor I’m working with now as a TA, he won’t make any decisions in the class without consulting me....” This experience made Raquel feel valued, which helped her build her internal confidence as an instructor. At the same time, Raquel also had, “...definite moments when students did not take what I was saying seriously or kind of questioned the content or the certain positions within the multicultural framework. Yeah that kind of undermining the educator phenomenon definitely happened.”

Aryanna shared in this experience, when she said, “I am presumed incompetent the minute I walk into a room, ... evaluations are always much different than my peers.” For these

participants, their role as instructor was colored by the perceptions that others had of them based on ethnicity.

### ***Supervision***

Miguel's experience of supervising a student about broaching the topic of race within the counselor-client relationship involved the supervisee dismissing that it was necessary. As Miguel recounted the supervisee stating: "... we (counselors) don't really talk about that, we don't really talk about that unless the client brings it up, am I (counselor) supposed to bring it up or why is that important I don't understand why that's important." In this dialogue Miguel, being a supervisor-of-color, also felt that the topic of race within the supervisory relationship was ignored and dismissed by the supervisee; thus further negating Miguel's ethnic identity within his professional one. For Miguel and other participants this dismissal of race in supervisory discussions represented the power of the White system to pushback when the status quo - that racism does not exist in counseling was disrupted (i.e. that racism exists).

### ***Research***

In the area of research, some of the participants expressed a lack of support for race related research or a disconnect between one's professional values and those of the field. As Miguel stated, "wanting to research what I research and being asked repeatedly and even being asked at job interviews always by White people, "what does this have to do with counselor ed, ..." Carina felt a disconnect between the research values of her counseling program and her professional value of preparing competent counselors. "I was conflicted in my values of that and being at a university that was just research ... because research is gonna be more important and for me that was an insult because you're telling me that you're gonna neglect the future

possible counselors...” Carina felt insulted because her viewpoint that training counselors to be multiculturally competent providers was less of a priority than research.

### ***Counseling***

Alicia stated about her clinical experience, “as a woman of color who’s in the clinical world kind of battling not just the racial ethnic stuff but the gender stuff too.” She also retold an experience of being microaggressed by a White client in therapy because of her sexual orientation. Alicia’s experiences spoke to the relevance of intersectionality on professional identity development. As Alicia stated, she had to “battle” the intersection of her multiple identities (race, sexual orientation, and gender) that were often invalidated. Mary experienced a time when a client asked her if she was a person of color because she wanted to ensure that she got the best care possible. To Mary, this question represented a microaggression in that the client was making a judgment of Mary’s clinical ability based on her accent.

### ***Leadership and Advocacy***

For some of the participants, their experience with leadership and advocacy felt disconnected and further isolating. Mary discussed how she felt disconnected from leadership:

I am an outlier because people do not have that kind of goal, the goal is to contribute to the profession in a way that is congruent with the values, you know leadership, service and identity ... I think we have the opportunity to create hope for people and it’s hard for me to see that sometimes the profession is so removed [from] who I am.

Due to the experience of feeling disconnected from leadership in the field, Mary had a complex professional identity developmental process of figuring out “who I feel I am in this profession” and made her feel “guilt ... about being disingenuous”.

### ***Biopsychosocial Outcomes***

The biopsychosocial outcomes included: having a stomach ulcer (Aryanna), “serious heartburn” and “panic attacks” (Marisol). Raquel and Aryanna experienced feeling exhausted and emotionally fatigued. Raquel stated, “(I had) psychological and emotional turmoil because of issues of privilege.” Miguel expressed, “it’s like psychologically it’s been incredibly difficult and emotionally it’s been sometimes overwhelming.” Others shared social consequences, such as feeling silenced (Aryanna), shut down (Aryanna), isolated and lonely (Carina, Mary and Raquel), confused (Aryanna and Carina), anxious (Carina), and feeling a sense of incompleteness or rootlessness (Mary).

The participants’ experience of being one of the few pervaded all five aspects of their doctoral journey: teaching, supervision, research and scholarship, counseling practice, and leadership and advocacy. Thus, the participants had to figure out how to integrate a part of their personal identity (i.e. race and ethnicity) that was being actively denied and oppressed in their doctoral experiences. The next theme speaks to how this complication led to a counterstory of how the participants navigated professional identity development.

### **Navigating Professional Identity Development**

The next theme, navigating professional identity development, describes the ways in which the participants figured out ways of coping and persisting despite experiences of isolation and marginalization. This category includes two subthemes: (1) facing “White spaces” and (2) complicated engagement.

#### ***Facing White Spaces: “The boat’s gonna rock back”***

“My entire professional identity formation has had to evolve conditioned by the White spaces that I’m in (i.e the professional setting)” (Miguel). Aryanna said, “there’s a lot of like me



having to check in, you know like am I a crazy person like I'm seeing a lot of things that no one else in the room is bringing up so there's a lot of that having to trust myself." Raquel also shared, "there was a fear that ... I do know what I'm talking about but I don't know how it's gonna be received."

Because as Miguel described about his experience with advocating:

...you get this message that if you rock the boat the boat's gonna rock back and hit you in the face and that's really what it's felt as. So emotionally and psychologically I think the metaphor captures it. You know they teach you to be critically conscious and multiculturally aware, social justice, activist, go and push for change but the moment you do it and be who you are then the boat is gonna come back and hit you in the face.

This excerpt captures the power of the dominant system to resist social justice action. Even though the counseling program promotes multiculturalism and social justice, the power of the system (i.e. "the boat") to maintain the status quo remained strong. The participants coped with facing white spaces by: (a) utilizing support systems by creating consultation groups and making "family" at school, (b) harnessing cultural capital by staying true to their ethnic roots and having pride in being Latinx, and (c) persisting in academia by graduating.

### ***Complicated Engagement: "A dance"***

Complicated engagement refers to the participants' experience of contradiction within their professional identity. Mary likened the navigation of this White space as "a dance between growing as a person, growing as a doc student and also growing in understanding yourself as someone in this context." This "dance" described the complicated engagement that the participants had with their professional identity development within a predominantly White context. As Jose described about his engagement of, "constantly navigating and juggling" and

Miguel said, “[there has] been a lot of push and pulls.” Jose and Miguel were referring to the juggling and management of multiple roles and responsibilities that are often complicated by racialized situations.

The participants felt a love-hate relationship with the profession. On the one hand, the participants loved their profession and on the other, they disliked the manifestations of power and privilege that occurred throughout their experiences. Mary recounted about her professional identity developmental process:

So my process is because it’s uncomfortable and scary... is about holding that fear and holding that tension and saying okay maybe you don’t know it all so maybe they do things, do you want to be part of it yes or no.

Often, the participants engaged in self-questioning about whether or not they want to get involved in professional activities and in the profession itself. Yet by making sacrifices (in terms of not spending time with family, for example) and playing it safe (or playing by the rules of academia, at times), the participants persevered to become a Latinx counselor educator.

### **Becoming a Counselor Educator: Towards a Re-Definition**

The participants’ experience of becoming a Latinx counselor educator in a predominantly White profession involved facing White spaces and engaging in a complicated professional identity development. Based on the experiences of microaggressions and the resulting biopsychosocial outcomes, the participants were placed in a position where they had to find voice, reclaim power, and disrupt the norm.

### ***Disrupting the Norm***

As Latinx doctoral students in predominantly White counseling programs, the participants disrupted the norm of what and who an emerging counselor educator can look like

and behave. The current norm of the ideal counselor educator is White, aligned with White cultural values, and interested in self-advancement (Hinkle, Iarussi, Schermer, & Yensel, 2014). In contrast, the participants in this study were Latinx, aligned with Latinx cultural values, and invested in social justice action and service to marginalized communities.

Alicia talked about her ability to thrive despite not being expected to succeed, “I’ve got what it takes to get my degree...[I was someone] who isn’t expected to be in this profession but to be that person and not only to kind of survive within the profession with these constraints but to thrive in it.” Mary also stated about her role in disrupting the norm:

When I walk in a classroom and I am the professor with this anguish and my accent and this hair and this skin I carry that delivers a message to the students about possibility and why not, disruption...it [my presence] is a sense of disruption because I’m not supposed to be here you know, I’m not supposed to be in that classroom...we look at the popular discourse, I shouldn’t have these high expectations and aspirations and dreams.

As Mary stated, “my presence is resistance and the fact that you’re doing this [dissertation] that is resistance, and the fact that I’m being interviewed is resistance and with resistance comes hope.” Mary shares an important aspect of these counterstories, which is hope. Hope to sustain, resist, persevere, and graduate.

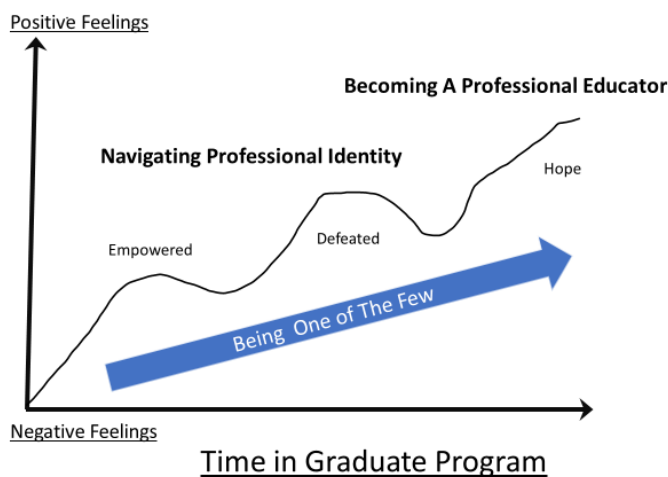
### **Discussion**

Despite facing racialized experiences in all areas of doctoral training – teaching, supervision, research and scholarship, counseling, and leadership and advocacy, the participants in this study navigated professional identity development to redefine what it means to be a counselor educator and supervisor. This redefinition was rooted in their ethnicity and how that

interfaced with a predominately White context that marginalized them based on it (Haskins & Singh, 2015). Unlike the current research on this topic that failed to consider the role of race and ethnicity, and showed a linear process of professional identity development, this study showed a more complex process. Figure 1 shows this process.

**Figure 1**

*Surviving the Rollercoaster*



The participants' process was more like a rollercoaster because the participants had racialized experiences that made them doubtful about their position in the doctoral program. Unlike the White American doctoral student experience of resolving the emotional dissonance experienced during professional identity development (Dollarhide et al., 2013), the participants experienced emotional and psychological challenges at all developmental points.

Upon entry to the doctoral program, the participants felt excitement and joy at their choice to pursue a doctorate in a field that they loved. While they enjoyed the typical challenges of the *uphill ride* associated with doctoral studies, they also began to experience times of invalidation and invisibility due to being *one of the few*. As these effects accumulated during the doctoral program, the rollercoaster entered a decline. During this decline, the participants felt

disillusionment and feelings of defeat. As Raquel shared, “I wanted to quit and you know crawl up in a fetal position.”

When they started to navigate these experiences, the participants found a way to shift the rollercoaster, initiating an incline that was empowering and motivating. Since the effects of being *one of the few* persists throughout doctoral study, the participants experienced another dip. This decline was less severe and began to represent the transformation from wanting to quit to wanting to finish. As Carina expressed, “I have been able to overcome it even when the mountain seems so high up and I’m gonna make it...” Their status of being one of the few was now a source of strength, resistance, and disruption to the norm. From a place of pride and connection to cultural roots, the participants navigated the often isolating and invalidating experiences of their doctoral program. Hinojosa and Carney (2015) also reported that Mexican American doctoral students integrated their ethnicity and family with academia. Hinkle, Iarussi, Schermer, and Yensel (2014) further supported that succeeding for family and community amid obstacles was a source of motivation for pursuing a doctorate.

Due to the rollercoaster experience as it was influenced by racialized situations and ethnicity, the participants shared a collective counterstory that expanded our current understanding of the professional identity development process. Their counterstories of professional identity development tell the experience of resistance and disruption to the norm, because even though the power of the predominantly White counseling profession made them feel doubtful, they resisted. Their experiences, albeit ridden with moments of marginalization and defeat, tell of a much bigger picture, a picture full of pride, resistance, community, altruism, and perseverance.

## **Implications for Counselor Education**

Given that the participants' process was more like a rollercoaster and influenced by racialized experiences, validation, advocacy, and support are crucial in all areas of doctoral training (teaching, supervision, research, counseling, and leadership and advocacy). Counseling programs, faculty and staff, supervisors and mentors, and students must validate that racialized experiences occur. This validation can simply be actively listening and telling students that their experiences may have been based on race and/or ethnicity. To validate is not negating, ignoring, or minimizing that a racialized encounter occurred. It is saying that it did occur, and that is powerful (Hinojosa & Carney, 2015) and builds trust.

Beyond validation, individuals can also advocate on behalf of the marginalized student by speaking up when racism happens and providing a safe place for students to process these situations. Professors can create opportunities for students to engage in race-related research and curriculum that addresses marginalization (Haskins & Singh, 2015). Hinojosa and Carney (2015) agree that providing academic activities concurrent with ethnic identities is crucial to providing an inclusive learning environment where all voices are heard.

Another recommendation is to provide support for Latinx doctoral students throughout the educational journey. The participants in the Cartwright (2018) study also shared how supportive experiences were vital. Since community and family are crucial, counselor educators and supervisors can focus on initiatives aimed at promoting these within counseling programs. For example, counseling programs can provide funding for family centered events that promote the importance of the family in the lives of the students. Counseling professionals can provide students with networking opportunities to create "families" at school and in the professional community that include mentors who can validate racialized experiences. Lerma et al. (2015)

also discussed the importance of counseling departments promoting, facilitating, and valuing a collectivistic orientation to create a “familia” in doctoral programs (p. 172).

Students can engage in online social media support groups tailored to the needs of students of color, such as the Facebook page, Latinas Completing Doctoral Degrees and the Latino Researchers’ Network. Counseling programs can provide resources, such as a list of therapists-of-color and other professional organizations focused on race-related topics, a good example is the Critical Race Studies in Education Association. These resources assist in developing leadership and advocacy skills.

Lastly, counselor educators must engage in critical discourse about what types of learning environments are being cultivated, and whether they are building inclusion and advocacy into curriculum and supervision practices (Hinojosa & Carney, 2015). By having these dialogues counselor educators can contribute to a professional cultural change that minimizes marginalization and racialized events. This will trickle down to the doctoral training of students. The opportunity is now to produce counselor educators who have a strong sense of their ethnic identity for, as our current models state, professional identity cannot exist without personal identity (Gibson et al., 2010).

### **Future Research and Limitations**

Future research could emphasize the role of race and ethnicity on professional identity development and develop a model that reflects these influences. Another idea would be to explore the role spirituality and one’s racial identity developmental stage may play. Guilt arose as a common experience for some of the participants; however the intricacies of how guilt played a role was not fleshed out – this could be another area of research. Lastly, it would be helpful to learn more about social justice identity within this process.

As with any qualitative research study, certain limitations exist in the interpretations and application of the findings, which are: the researcher's positionality, the small sample size, and the diversity of the participants. As the only researcher and data coder, the findings provided one viewpoint on the professional identity development of the participants based on a LatCrit perspective. Also, the sample size of eight participants limits the application and transferability of the results to other individuals who are not like the population studied. Further, most of the sample was female and heterosexual. The experiences of males and individuals identifying with other sexual orientations were not fully captured; therefore, the results more likely reflect the experiences of female, heterosexual Latinx doctoral students in counseling programs.

### **Conclusion**

Even though, the counseling profession promotes multiculturalism and social justice within its curriculum and practice, and has been able to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of faculty (Baggerly et al. 2017), students and faculty belonging to non-White racial and ethnic group continue to feel marginalized (Perez & Carney, 2018). This study suggests the same, that students-of-color in doctoral counseling programs continue to feel marginalized in all areas of doctoral training. As a result, students-of-color have a complex professional identity process that serves as a counterstory of resistance and disruption to the norm. As the profession enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century and will continue to embrace diversity, now is the time to explore and examine why students-of-color feel marginalized; and develop anti-racist professional practices and pedagogy that can create equitable and inclusive learning environments for all students.



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