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Shaping the Counseling Profession: Analyzing the Leadership Experiences of Former American Counseling Association (ACA) State Branch Presidents

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The researchers used a phenomenological qualitative research design to explore the lived leadership experiences of eight past presidents within one state branch of the American Counseling Association. The researchers identified five themes: (a) advocacy; (b) leadership qualities; (c) involvement; (d) challenges to unity; and (e) wellness, self-care, and boundaries. Additionally, the authors identified a subtheme, relationships, within the involvement theme. The authors discuss the implications for leadership practice and research and provide recommendations for archiving leadership history. The archival of this leadership history provides depth and insight to the experiences of counseling leaders and may engender leadership development among current counseling professionals.

Leadership helps shape an organization to reach optimal effectiveness and achieve success. Although leadership is a well-researched topic across professions, scholars report limited research on leadership within the counseling literature, especially related to training leaders (Paradise et al., 2010). As the counseling profession has developed, counseling professionals have become increasingly interested in leadership development.

The American Counseling Association's (ACA) Code of Ethics emphasizes leadership and advocacy as components to a counselor's identity (American Counseling Association, 2014). Leadership is also visible in key areas that represent the profession including the mission of the counseling international honor society of Chi Sigma Iota (CSI), and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Standards. The mission of CSI is to "promote scholarship, research, professionalism, leadership, advocacy, and excellence in counseling, and to recognize high attainment in the pursuit of academic and clinical excellence in the profession of counseling" (CSI, 2009, sec. Our Mission, para. 1). Furthermore, the CACREP (2016) Standards emphasize the importance of fostering the development of leaders among counseling students both at the entry level (e.g., development of school counselors as leaders within the school), and the doctoral level as leadership and advocacy is one of the five core domains of doctoral training.

Hence, leadership is not only a responsibility of counselors, but also a foundational part of their professional identity (ACA, 2014). The development of counseling leaders presents a need for further exploration into the characteristics, skills, and practices of effective leaders. Current and past leaders within the counseling profession are an important resource in

developing training for leaders. Therefore, this article focuses on exploring the leadership experiences of counseling leaders, particularly those of a state level counseling association.

Leadership Paradigms

Scholars are continually researching and theorizing the essential characteristics, skills, and practices of effective leaders. Contingency theories, such as Fiedler's model, surmise that the context of a leader determines effective leadership. Fiedler's contingency model divides leaders into two fixed styles: task oriented and relationship oriented and emphasizes the need for the leader style to fit the situation (Fiedler, 1967). According to Fiedler, the way to improve leader effectiveness is to change the leader to match the situation or change the situation to match the leader (1967). Hence, the leader must be flexible and adaptable in order to be effective.

Scholars also speculate that inherent characteristics or behaviors constitute one's aptitude for leadership. For example, according to Schultz and Schultz (2010), two behaviors are prevalent among effective leaders: initiating structure and being considerate. Initiating structure includes organization and assignment, as well as supervising completion of tasks. Leaders initiating structure focus on results, while being considerate, or being attuned to others' feelings, and prioritizing their relationships with those they lead.

Within contemporary leadership theories, charismatic and transformational leaders maintain good relationships with their followers and seek to inspire them to reach their potential (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Lastly, Greenleaf (1970) describes a servant leadership style, which is distinguished by a motivation to help others improve their lives, and a focus on the needs of others. A servant leader prioritizes the well-being of their followers over all other stakeholders. Similar to a transformational leader, a servant leader strives to engender individual development to help their followers achieve success. Lastly, an ethical leadership model infuses aspects of both transformational and servant leadership styles (Brown & Treviño, 2006), but with a greater focus on ethical behavior and fairness, and an emphasis on both the followers and the organization (Canavesi & Minelli, 2021).

Brown et al. (2005) defines the ethical leadership model as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to the followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision making" (p. 120). Ethical leadership includes characteristic of both the "moral person" and "moral manager" (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Treviño et al., 2000). The moral person facet includes personality trait (e.g., honesty, integrity, openness, respect), while the moral manager address how leaders use their power and authority to engender ethical behavior in followers. Researchers found ethical leadership is related to lower levels of ethical ambiguity and job stress with a positive influence on performance quality and employee satisfaction (Sarwar et al., 2020; Schwepker & Dimitriou, 2021). Hence, the

aforementioned leadership approaches yield positive outcomes, and it is important to explore how these translate across professions, including the counseling profession.

Leadership within the Counseling Profession

The importance of relationships and ethics in effective leadership is evident in the evolution of leadership theory (i.e., Fiedler, 1967; Greenleaf & Spears, 2002; Treviño et al., 2000). The integration of qualities emphasized in leadership theories (i.e., emotional intelligence, openness, conscientiousness, context, being considerate, inspiring others to reach their greatest potential, promoting well-being) align with the traits of professional counselors. Additionally, the contingency models emphasize the significance of the situation and the context of effective leadership, which reflects counselors' flexibility and ability to assess the bigger circumstances, "meet people where they are" and adjust their work accordingly. Although the profession encourages counselors to embrace leadership roles, counseling research has lacked a focus on leadership training and development (Paradise et al., 2010).

In response to the limited research on counseling leadership, West et al. (2003) presented a counselor leadership development model that consists of three dimensions (context, vision, and action), and serves as a foundation for counselor educators, counselors, and counselors-in-training to monitor and foster their leadership aptitudes in response to the profession's call for leadership development. Contextually, the developers assert that counselors should appreciate the profession historically and presently, while exhibiting an understanding of current issues in the profession. Additionally, counseling leaders should remain actively connected to individuals they serve through interactive dialogue. In accordance with the second dimension, counseling leaders should inspire, similar to transformational leaders, through communication of their vision for the profession. Finally, counseling leaders should be reflective of their actions before articulating or implementing their vision. Leaders should also share their vision with group members for feedback and to ensure it reflects the values, philosophies, and mission of the group (McKibben et al., 2017).

The literature related to counseling leadership is largely conceptual. Topics include models of leadership development (Gibson et al., 2018; West et al., 2003), leadership behaviors (McKibben et al., 2017; Paradise et al., 2010), leadership models (Peters & Luke, 2021), and school counseling specific leadership (Lowe et al., 2017; Peters et al., 2018). Some researchers have explored leadership qualities and dynamics amongst counseling leaders (i.e., Black & Magnuson, 2005; McKibben et al., 2017).

In a phenomenological study, Black and Magnuson (2005) identified 10 female leaders in the counseling profession through their leadership in counseling organizations, publications in counseling journals, or authorship of counseling books and compared these leaders' accounts to their protégés experiences of them. In a content analysis, McKibben et al. (2017) analyzed empirical and conceptual articles, as well as leadership profiles, to identify

emergent themes amongst counseling leaders. In both studies, the researchers identified themes related to personal (i.e., authenticity, humility), interpersonal (i.e., compassion, assertiveness), and professional/leadership qualities (i.e., intentionality, vision) of counseling leaders.

Other researchers explored the experiences of counseling leaders. Magnuson et al. (2003) interviewed 10 counseling leaders regarding their leadership development. Participants shared that personal attributes and values, family support, and professional models contributed to the process and progression of their roles in leadership. Yet, the majority of participants credited serendipity or happenstance, and seizing opportunities to their process of becoming a leader in the field. Additionally, Meany-Walen et al. (2013) explored the leadership development of 58 elected or appointed leaders of counseling organizations. The researchers identified themes and subthemes regarding leadership development experiences and advice to students and programs to begin and strengthen their leadership endeavors. While the researchers detailed personal and professional profiles of leaders (i.e., education level, occupation), they did not identify the respected organization in which the participants held a leadership role. Thus, it is unknown if certain organizations or leadership positions are more represented than others.

In a recent study, Peters and Vereen (2020) interviewed 12 counseling leaders in ACA and ACA affiliate organization (e.g., Association for Counselor Education and Supervision) regarding their leadership experience and identified six themes: person as a leader, culture, privilege and responsibility, counseling leadership, advocacy, and impact. The authors highlighted the following within the themes: leadership qualities, a desire to be culturally congruent, the accessibility of leadership roles, the importance of mentorship, how to meet the needs of those they lead, and the importance of advocacy and impact. A possible limitation to this study is the inclusion criteria, as the authors required participants to hold a doctoral degree and have experience in counselor education, hence, excluding the experiences of non-academic counseling leaders.

Similarly, Peters et al. (2020) explored leadership experiences of counselors and counseling psychologists in counseling-related leadership position. The researchers constructed a theory that included causal conditions (i.e., the events that led participants to engage in counseling leadership), contextual factors (i.e., conditions and patterns of action strategies taken by the participants in leadership), intervening conditions (i.e., factors that influenced said action strategies), actions (i.e., all activity that lead to action), and relational oriented actions (i.e., actions that center on relationships). Limitations to this study may include the inclusion criteria of participants having a PhD or EdD and being an associate or full professor, thus excluding the non-academic counseling leaders and assistant professor or non-tenure track counselor educators. Additionally, the researchers did not differentiate between participants' identities as counseling psychologists or counselors. Counselors and counseling psychologists undergo different degree programs; thus, two distinct accrediting

bodies accredit their degree programs (i.e., CACREP [counseling and counselor education]; American Psychological Association [APA] [counseling psychologists]). Counselors and counseling psychologists also possess different licensures (i.e., licensed professional counselor [LPC]; licensed psychologist). Hence, the differences of core professional identities, trainings, and licensure could challenge the homogeneity of the sample.

Lastly, Harrichand et al. (2021) found counselor education leaders' competence in their leadership role conversely related to work-related burnout. Counselor educators with more leadership experience have an increased likelihood of experiencing work-related burnout. Hence, counselor education leaders should be mindful of the number of leadership positions they occupy and engage in professional development to increase leadership competency to mitigate work-related burnout.

The current literature provides a limited scope of experiences related to counseling leadership, particularly due to the inclusion criteria of participants. Additionally, there is a dearth of recent literature exploring the leadership experiences of non-academic counseling leaders. Furthermore, there is a lack of literature that provides an in-depth exploration on the experiences of those who served in a specific leadership position within counseling, such as the presidency of a state branch of ACA. Thus, a need exists for more research on the experiences of counseling leaders. This information may help foster leadership development among counseling professionals. The purpose of the current study is to explore the leadership experiences of past presidents of a state counseling organization. The research question is: What are the lived experiences of leadership of past presidents of a state branch of ACA?

Method

Design

We chose a qualitative, phenomenological research design for use in this study. The purpose of phenomenological research is to explore the lived experiences of participants with a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, this methodology was appropriate for exploring the research question in this study.

Researchers

Initially, there were four researchers involved in the study and each one participated in conducting interviews. Following the interviews, one researcher decided to discontinue her involvement in the study and one additional researcher was added later to the study. The final group of researchers were all women, one was a counselor educator, two were counselor education doctoral students, and one was a master's level practicing counselor. All researchers had experience with counseling leadership at the state and/or national level and expressed their value of leadership development in the counseling profession.

Participants

The targeted population for this study was past presidents of a state branch of ACA. All participants were past presidents of one state branch of ACA in the southeastern part of the United States. There were eight participants, five females and three males. Regarding race/ ethnicity, all eight were White. Regarding presidency terms, two participants served as president in the 1980s, three served in the 1990s, and three served from 2000 to 2016. The participants had various levels of current involvement with the state organization.

Procedure

Following approval from the institutional review board, we obtained a list of past presidents ($N = 36$) from the state branch and contacted them through email and/or postal mail to invite them to participate in the study and schedule interviews. Prior to beginning the interviews, consent forms were reviewed and signed by all participants. The researchers conducted the semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately 45-90 minutes. The interviews were recorded, and following completion of the interviews, we transcribed the recordings and analyzed them for themes.

Instrumentation

We collected data through a demographic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire included items about gender, race/ ethnicity, and year of presidency. The interview questions focused on their perspective about the history of the organization, the context of the organization, events that occurred during their presidency, and leadership qualities and skills. Sample questions included (a) Are there any particular moments in FCA's history that stand out to you? Please explain. (b) What leadership skills do you think you brought to your presidency? (c) What's the best leadership advice you were ever given? Thus, we sought to learn about the lived experiences of the past presidents.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, we used a phenomenological method described by Moustakas (1994). At the beginning of the study, we met to discuss our leadership experiences and beliefs about leadership and to create space from our personal views and reactions for the purpose of promoting trustworthiness through the practice of "epoche," or bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Due to the connection to the topic and our on-going involvement in this branch's leadership, we regularly discussed and bracketed our reactions throughout data analysis to prevent contextual bias. Following transcription of the interviews, we each read through the transcripts individually multiple times to understand the participants' experiences, identify significant statements, and delete similar statements, a process known as horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). Next, we met together during a series of meetings to group the statements into themes, known as meaning units (Moustakas, 1994). We then all reviewed the themes again in comparison to the earlier analysis to confirm that they represented the experiences of the

participants as we understood them, and to verify saturation. During data analysis and manuscript development, we also engaged in peer debriefing (Creswell, 2013) by having an external auditor review the process and discuss any concerns with us, to promote trustworthiness. The external auditor had experience in qualitative research, as well as counseling leadership.

Results

Five themes emerged from the data. The themes included (a) advocacy; (b) leadership qualities; (c) involvement; (d) challenges to unity; and (e) wellness, self-care, and boundaries. We also identified one subtheme, relationships, within the involvement theme. Each theme and subtheme are discussed below.

Advocacy

Participants discussed the importance of advocacy within the profession. Regarding self-advocacy, Shelia stated, “I was very vocal, good, bad, but it worked...You can make a difference if you stay strong and advocate for yourself.” Additionally, leaders discussed the role of advocacy in the professional identity of counselors. Becky remarked, “I don’t think people see their professionalism as being more than just going to work everyday, and it is...It is your duty to try and make changes for the better of your profession and your clients.”

Participants also discussed the importance of advocating for clients and the profession. Becky stated, “Get involved. Things aren’t going to change unless the people in the trenches try to change it.” Sara also commented, “A really valuable role both at the state and national level was to push those issues and keep being the voice of the wilderness for people who don’t have a voice.”

Participants also discussed advocacy in terms of educating others. In discussing the importance of counseling, Terry stated, “Counseling in fact is the only solution we have left to the world’s issues. Because we help people become fulfilled, we help people recognize their strengths...there will always be [a] need for counselors.” Additionally, Stan reported, “I don’t think we do nearly enough to educate the public.” He further remarked, “We haven’t yet gotten that association when people hear the word counselor, and they think this skill set; and I think we need to keep working on that.” Terry also discussed educating others through research, “If we don’t raise the level of inquiry, we will never be accepted by everyone...If you’re not accepted, you’re behind. We have to raise the bar, to do the types of studies and inquiries that change the game.”

Participants also discussed political advocacy and the importance of numbers. Carol stated, “We lost a joint voice that was so much more powerful.” Additionally, John commented, “When you’re dealing with things related to public policy and legislation, you see the benefits for having all counselors together...numbers make a difference.” Becky also reported, “Go up on the hill....Realizing they didn’t know our issues and it was up to us to tell them and that’s really empowering... it was an eye opener.” Thus, the leaders identified various types of advocacy and the importance of each of them.

Leadership Qualities

Participants discussed leadership qualities and roles of a leader, including being strategic, a role model, consensus builder, delegator, and facilitator. In discussing being a role model, Stan remarked, "A lot of good role modeling; some people who tell you how to deal with some of the really tough situations that you encountered." Regarding consensus building, Terry shared, "I've learned to very much be a consensus builder, and no ideas are bad. I think there are not obstacles, just hills. We just get around them somehow." Additionally, in discussing delegation, Sara commented, "Include everyone...give everyone a responsible role. I think too many leaders try to take too much on themselves...let go a little bit... delegating and then letting people go with it. Don't micromanage." Stan also stated, "We have a lot of stuff going on, let's do what we can about accomplishing some things; I don't care who gets credit for the idea." Leaders also discussed the importance of strategic planning, instead of the president leading with their own initiatives. Stan stated, "[A] group says this is our priorities for the next [few] years and at the end of the time we will reevaluate...the president will become more of a facilitator of processes." Finally, Becky remarked, "Find good people; the success of your presidency depends on your board."

Leaders also discussed strategies for leading that helped them become and succeed as a leader. John stated, "I took a lot of initiative...I made it a point everyday, as president, that I spoke to at least 3 people a day in leadership...I would wake up every day, thinking who would I need to talk to today." Participants also discussed the importance of listening. Stan remarked, "listen...some of the best ideas come from the most unlikely places." Leaders also discussed the important of not taking leadership too seriously, enjoying the experience, and knowing that difficult times will come and go. Terry stated, "Don't take things too seriously; enjoy your people, enjoy the moment." He also commented on the importance of remembering, "This too shall pass" during difficult times, and to "keep calm and carry on." Thus, participants discussed the many roles of a leader and the strategies they used to lead the organization.

Involvement

Leaders discussed the process of getting members involved in leadership roles. Jennifer remarked, "Someone would get involved, they would bring a friend, that friend would get involved. They bring someone else, or they meet someone and encouraged them...it was very much yes "you can do this". Additionally, Sara stated, "Include everyone in what you're doing; to give everyone else a responsible role. I think too many leaders try to take too much on themselves."

Participants also commented on the benefits and challenges associated with leadership involvement. Regarding benefits, leaders discussed growth, enjoyment, and opportunities. Becky stated, "Become involved in your professional associations. You're only going to grow personally and professionally, and your clients are only going to be better for your

involvement.” Related to enjoyment, Becky also shared, “A lot of us used it for social outlets, too. We worked hard, we played hard.” She further commented, “Some of the best times of my life, I think, [were] spent on the FCA board and the division boards.” Additionally, Jennifer stated, “[The] people I got to meet, the friends I got to make, and the places I got to go, I would never be able to do without [the organization].”

In discussing the challenges, Sara commented, “It’s harder to get people to take leadership positions ... There doesn’t seem to be as much as a value on civic involvement as there used to be. Additionally, in commenting on communication, Jennifer stated, “The problem, the disconnect, I think that’s why it’s so hard to reach people. You got email, but there’s not that face to face [communication] anymore.”

Finally, diversity was discussed related to a benefit and a challenge. Sara stated, “You have to learn about other cultures and reach out and...bring leadership from those [cultures].” Jennifer also commented, “When you can get people together that’s good, but it is hard...it is the geography of the state.” Finally, Stan remarked, “We [the board] all were different, we all had different personalities.” Thus, leaders discussed getting members involved in leadership and the benefits and challenges associated with involvement.

A subtheme, relationships, emerged within the involvement theme. Leaders discussed the value of relationships in the leadership process. Sara stated, “The whole connection part of it is what the counseling association is all about...A place to bounce ideas off of and form connections with people on a human relations and a friendship basis as well as professionally.” Additionally, John shared, “I will always value the interactions and the relationships of the different counseling specialties, and how valuable that was.” Becky also remarked, “I met so many awesome people who made me a much better counselor and a much better person, a better friend... I can’t say enough about the impact on my life.” Hence, the participants emphasized the relationships formed through leadership.

Challenges to Unity

Leaders discussed the importance of unifying the counseling profession. Carol remarked, “The role of president...make sure everybody is talking to each other and gather consensus and build from there because if you don’t have everyone on the same page you will not be able to move forward.” Leaders also discussed lack of unity when state divisions disaffiliated with the state branch and the resulting negative consequences. Stan stated, “Individual divisions started having their own conferences... people that should have been talking to each other weren’t. Not necessarily by design, but simply by lack of opportunity.” Additionally, John reported, “I think we lost a lot of value.” Finally, Jennifer described the disaffiliation process by stating, “Family Feud, that’s what it was like. Everybody was taking sides, lots of tension.” Thus, participants emphasized the value of unity, and discussed the challenges and consequences of disaffiliation and lack of unity.

Wellness, Self-Care, and Boundaries

The leaders discussed the importance of wellness and self-care and the role of maintaining boundaries in this process. John stated, “I think it’s important for any type of leader ... there needs to be a balance. There’s work, there’s learning, but there’s got to be fun.” Shelia also remarked, “It’s very important to schedule. ... when you have [the association] and your real job and your home life.” In discussing ways to maintain wellness and balance, participants discussed multiple supportive individuals and various strategies. Becky commented, “I was very lucky to have a very supportive family ... And also, it’s very important to have your employer to be supportive.” Additionally, Sara reported, “You go to your support group. ... And bounce things off of them.” Stan also stated, “I’ve always been active physically, lots of sports activity I’m not good at any of them but I enjoy them.” Regarding boundaries, Becky commented, “Don’t take it home with you, which is easier said than done...healthy boundaries.” She further stated, “Respect boundaries and make sure you find ways to deal with the stress because, it’s a high burnout profession...Find the right way to balance your professional life with your personal life.” Hence the participants acknowledged the importance of wellness in being a successful leader.

Discussion

This qualitative exploration focused on the lived experiences of eight past presidents of a state branch of ACA. We extracted five themes and one subtheme from the data. The themes included (a) advocacy; (b) leadership qualities; (c) involvement; (d) challenges to unity; and (e) wellness, self-care, and boundaries. We identified the subtheme, relationships, within the involvement theme.

The first theme focused on advocacy, with the participants identifying various types of advocacy as being crucial for the counseling profession, including self-advocacy, advocacy for clients, and advocacy for the profession. Counseling researchers have identified advocacy as an area within leadership values and qualities (McKibben et al., 2017; Peters & Vereen, 2020). Additionally, the counseling literature emphasizes the importance of counselors taking a leadership role in advocacy (i.e., advocacy competencies; Chang et al., 2012; Peters & Vereen, 2020). Advocacy training and experiences may also be integrated within counseling leadership training (i.e., Day on the Hill experience at the Institute for Leadership Training (ILT) for state, regional, and national leaders). Day on the Hill involves ILT attendees meeting with legislators on Capitol Hill to advocate for legislation important to counseling. Ratts and Hutchins (2009), in reference to client/student advocacy, discussed the importance of speaking out in order to create social-advocacy minded counselors. Thus, advocacy is an important role and responsibility for counseling leaders; and therefore, it is important to include as a component of leadership development training.

The second theme focused on leadership qualities. The participants identified several leadership qualities that are consistent with previous research, including being a delegator (i.e., assigning tasks; Schultz & Schultz, 2010), taking initiative (i.e., seizing opportunities; Magnuson et al., 2003), and listening (i.e., using counseling skills; Black & Magnuson, 2005). The participants also highlighted the importance of bringing people together or consensus building in leadership (McKibben et al., 2017). Peters and Vereen (2020) identified a similar theme in their phenomenological study regarding counseling leadership. Their theme of “person as a leader” reflected similar qualities of counseling leaders identified in the current study, including taking action, having vision, and supporting others. These counseling leaders were ongoing facilitators of consensus building and group cohesion to generate ideas and make decisions, which underlines their ability to be both task and relationship orientated (Fiedler, 1967).

The third theme focused on membership involvement. This included engagement of members through delegation to foster the development of new leaders. The theme of involvement highlighted the opportunity for counseling leaders to help members develop professionally, which aligns with the servant and transformational leaders’ philosophy of fostering individual growth and development of their followers. Particularly, servant leadership’s tendency to prioritize the needs of those they serve (Canavesi & Minelli, 2021). Peters and Vereen (2020) identified a similar theme regarding the importance of fostering leadership development among members through mentorship and modeling. Within the subtheme, relationships, the participants expressed how they valued relationships within their leadership experiences. Peters et al. (2020) highlighted the significance of relationally oriented activities in counseling leadership. Schultz and Schultz (2010) reported that being considerate was one of two actions emphasized by leaders, with considerate leaders prioritizing the relationship and being attuned to the feelings of others. Transformational leaders prioritize their relationships with followers by providing personalized attention to each individual (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Within the counselor leadership development model, West et al. (2003) also emphasized the importance of relationships in stating the importance of remaining connected with members.

The fourth theme focused on challenges to unity within the profession and included a discussion about disaffiliation and division within this particular state branch, as well as within the counseling profession. Previous research suggests the community orientation of counseling leaders as they recognize the importance of inclusion and unity among members (McKibben et al., 2017). Participants witnessed unsettling disconnect and conflict within the counseling community due to division and disaffiliation of members. These challenges emphasized the need for unity to move forward as a profession and community.

The final theme was wellness, self-care, and boundaries. Participants discussed the importance of balance between their personal and professional roles and responsibilities. A paucity of research exists concerning these

constructs applied to counseling leaders. In accordance to their ethical code, counselors must engage in self-care activities to ensure their own well-being to meet their professional responsibility (i.e., Section C in the ACA Code of Ethics; ACA, 2014). In terms of boundaries, counselors must ethically maintain boundaries with clients (i.e., Section A.6. in the *ACA Code of Ethics*; ACA, 2014). Researchers explored boundaries in the context of counseling relationships (e.g., Burns & Cruikshanks, 2017; Wu & Sonne, 2021) and training programs (e.g., Burns, 2019; Gleason & Hays, 2019). Yet, in the context of counseling leadership, boundary setting is a relatively unexplored construct. Interestingly, in this study, the participants articulated how they were able to bridge the concepts of wellness, self-care, and boundaries to engage in effective leadership.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The current study involved past presidents from only one state branch of ACA. Additionally, the sample lacked racial diversity with all of the participants identifying as White. In future studies, researchers may seek to address the limitations of this study by seeking a more diverse representation of participants. However, it is important to note that the majority of past leaders of this organization are White. To expand on the experiences shared, future research may include exploring the experiences of past national counseling leaders. Researchers may also further examine the leadership themes identified in this study, which may include the training and development of leaders, support during leadership experiences, and the role of past leaders.

Implications for Counseling Leaders

The counseling leaders identified the importance of advocacy in counseling. Therefore, it is crucial that leaders are trained in how to advocate for the profession and their role in this process. The Day on the Hill experience integrated within the Institute for Leadership Training (ILT) that ACA sponsors for state and national counseling leaders is one way to provide advocacy training and experience. However, this is only one type of advocacy, and it is important for counseling leaders to have additional advocacy training to learn how to effectively advocate on all levels (local, state, and national) for themselves, their clients, and the counseling profession.

The themes focused on leadership qualities and involvement emphasize the importance of identifying the strengths and areas for growth of current and developing leaders. Leaders and emerging leaders can complete leadership assessments to identify their leadership style and their strengths and growth areas. This facilitates self-awareness and provides useful information for the leadership team in working together as leaders. Organizations may integrate this assessment process during orientation for new leaders, a retreat for existing board members, and during programs to train emerging leaders. Then, leaders can use the results to enhance the leadership of the organization through assigning tasks and responsibilities related to leadership strengths, as well as developing a mentoring network and other strategies to help foster

development in areas for growth. It is unknown how many counseling organizations provide leadership training for new leaders and what is addressed in the training. Thus, future research may focus on examining training provided to leaders across counseling organizations.

The history of an organization is also important for leaders to know and understand in leading an organization. This includes challenges, such as disaffiliation as a historical component of many counseling organizations, as well as successes. Therefore, it is crucial to have clear, organized documents that provide a record of the history of the organization. Without consistent ways of archiving historical information and experience, organizations lose valuable information. Thus, we recommend that organizations archive their data, including the experiences of their leaders.

Counseling professionals emphasize wellness among clients and practitioners. Leaders may model this by providing opportunities for enjoyment and relationship building among leaders, in addition to addressing the organization's business affairs. Leadership teams may also set expectation regarding when business is addressed, such as only addressing business during business hours and not during the weekend and allowing a reasonable and mutually agreed upon response time for leaders in volunteer positions. It is crucial to establish boundaries in a technologically advanced society where communication, even among individuals not living in close geographic proximity, can be instantaneous through electronic platforms.

Conclusion

While leadership is not a newly researched construct, there is a lack of inquiry concerning leadership within the counseling profession. The current study focused on exploring the lived experiences of leadership of past presidents of a state branch of ACA. We identified five themes and one subtheme to capture the perspectives of the participants. These themes underline these counseling leaders' adoption of a servant leadership style through their emphasis on relationships, unity, and their focus on serving those they lead (Canavesi & Minelli, 2021). Their alignment with this style of leadership may be in part due to the counselor identity as a helping professional, and the ACA Code of Ethics' (2014) emphasis on service and professional leadership. It is through this shared knowledge and experience of these leaders that we continue grow and develop as leaders and as a profession.

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