




Leadership Skill Development in Master's-Level Counselor Education

Charity Godfrey, PhD

Walden University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States


Rick J. Cicchetti, PhD

Walden University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7035-2402>


Craig R. Blum, PhD

Walden University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0111-0338>

G. Michael Szirony, PhD

Walden University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7242-1048>

Tamara Harris, PhD

Walden University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States

Contact: charity.godfrey@waldenu.edu

Abstract

Student leadership identity is fast becoming one of the most critical challenges educational institutions face today. However, mental health counselors may be limited in the amount of education and training received as they become leaders in the field. There is currently no known mandate at the master's level for leadership embedded within the counseling curriculum in the educational environment, although research suggests otherwise. The purpose of this correlational predictive empirical study was to investigate leadership identity characteristics as measured by the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale, Revision 2 (SLRS-R2), moderated by demographic factors. Multiple regression analysis was used to determine outcome measures of the SLRS-R2 relating to leadership. Conclusions and suggestions for future practice regarding leadership skill development are provided.

Keywords: *leadership, student leadership identity, counselor identity, counselor education, social responsibility*

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Introduction

Student leadership development is a vital task for universities to address in preparing students for professional work (Camacho et al., 2021; Elwell & Elikofer, 2015), particularly with regard to initiating social change (Rosch & Caza, 2012). Students' beliefs focus on how they develop effective leadership skills (Caza & Rosch, 2014). Additionally, leadership curriculum efforts need to address the unique nature of each organization. As a result, leadership development training is a complex initiative to undertake within graduate education in counseling programs. Student leadership identity has been studied with various graduate populations (Mombourquette & Bedard, 2016), but more focus is needed on master's level mental health counselors due to professional imperatives for them to be socially responsible in their work (Brat et al., 2016; Jensen et al., 2016). Counselor education and training are needed to prepare graduates for leadership positions (Sönmez et al., 2019).

Counseling students are currently faced with greater complexities, challenges, and changes than in previous years (Hamann, 2016). So, addressing the need in professional work for better leadership identity and skills (Elwell & Elikofer, 2015) is not without difficulty, but effective leadership in the healthcare professions has been shown to be critical to the efficacy of treatment (Sfantou et al., 2017). Similar evidence exists for the need for leadership development during the educational process. Evidence exists for engagement in leadership as an important component of professional identity development (Meister et al., 2017). Leadership can be provided in many different settings, but it must be evidence-based to align with professional standards of conduct (American Counseling Association, 2014).

Need for Leadership Skill Development

Higher education is an influential factor in leadership development among college students (Dugan et al., 2014). For example, counseling students involved in leadership activities showed improved leadership development earlier in their professional careers (Janson et al., 2009; Young & Bryan, 2018). This involvement may help counselors better understand the roles and functions of leadership and strengthen their professional identity (Prosek & Hurt, 2014).

In general, higher education is directed toward the development of student leadership and socially responsible citizenship (Cauthen, 2016; Hevel et al., 2018). Counselor engagement in leadership is an important part of professional identity development (Meister et al., 2017), particularly during the course of a student's educational experience (Spurgeon, 2012). Prasath et al. (2021) posited the need to bring support to leadership dimensions that serve as transferable skills within diverse organizational leadership roles in the counseling profession, noting that counseling degrees afford experienced counselors myriad professional leadership opportunities. Leadership skills may also help increase counselor self-efficacy (Gibson et al., 2012), which is essential to the delivery of client services (Brogan et al., 2013). Counselors may not currently experience leadership training in their master's level mental health counseling programs (Green et al., 2013; Paradise et al., 2010; Prasath et al., 2021).

Women have higher levels of counselor leadership than men, likely due to higher levels of female enrollment in master's level counseling programs over that of males (National Center for Statistics, 2019; Aarons et al., 2017). Women also outnumber men in counseling doctoral programs by a three-to-one ratio (Willyard, 2011). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), there are significant racial differences in graduate education matriculation, with Asian Americans comprising nearly 18% of master's level students in comparison to Caucasian students (9.5%), African Americans (7%), and Hispanic students (4.1%). It is vital to evaluate race and gender rates as part of understanding leadership development in the field of counseling.

Leadership

During the 19th century, leadership was often conceptualized in sexist terms—innate to great men who rose to the occasion (Allio, 2013; Dionne et al., 2014; & Khwaja, 2019). Trait theory used the preceding ideas during the 1930–40s in the work of Alport, Super, and others (Uslu, 2019) to hypothesize that various innate characteristics or traits determine effective leadership. Leadership theory continued to evolve over the decades from these early ideas, often hierarchical in nature. Leadership theory evolved toward value-based ideas in that transformational leadership focused on group success for the betterment of an organization or the common goal in contrast to hierarchical ideas benefiting the employer (Cho et al., 2019).

Current perspectives consider leadership a “learned behavior,” influenced in part by personality characteristics of the individual (Dionne et al., 2014; Fischer et al., 2015). Day et al. (2014) posited the crux of leadership development as residing within ongoing daily leadership practices, suggesting that successful leadership skill development required ongoing attention. Developing interpersonal skills, motivating, setting goals, inspiring others, and applying feedback were key factors (Zheng & Muir, 2015). Engaging in daily leadership activities allows the novice to become the expert (Lorinkova & Bartol, 2021).

Student leadership development is a key focus of universities preparing students for professional work (Elwell & Elikofer, 2015), and social change is an important element associated with this process (Rosch & Caza, 2012). According to Caza and Rosch (2014), styles of leadership exist, along with myriad skills necessary to become an effective leader. Thus, curriculum choices on developing leadership may be construed as difficult. Caza and Rosch, using the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (SRLS; Astin, 1996), suggested that exposure to short-term leadership programs increased SRLS scores, leading potentially to a higher capacity for effective leadership. This supports the belief that leadership identity can be influenced with changes remaining over time, which may have significant curriculum implications.

Social Change

Modern views on leadership have evolved toward creating change to benefit others, as well as oneself (Nguyen, 2016; Rosch & Caza, 2012). Recently, investigations defined it as a relational process that is directed toward useful change toward a collective goal (Summerfield, 2014) or positive social change (Janke et al., 2015). These ideas suggested that cultivating a leadership identity would encourage socially responsible actions of the leader (Nguyen, 2016).

Purpose of the Present Study

The objective of this study was to determine whether a combination of factors related to leadership identity development would be predictive of prospective intent to pursue leadership roles in the counseling profession. Specifically, scores from selected subscales of the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale, Revision 2 (SRLS-R2) instrument, along with demographic factors of race and gender, were used to predict a proxy measure of leadership aspirations—namely, an intention to pursue a doctoral degree, following completion of a master’s degree in counseling that is accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). The main research question was: Do socially responsible leadership scale scores for Change, Consciousness of Self, and Congruence (as measured by the SRLS-R2); gender; and/or race predict intent to pursue a doctoral degree among master’s-level mental health counseling students who are enrolled in CACREP accredited counseling programs?

Method

Sample Selection and Procedures

The target population for this study consisted of master's level counseling students attending CACREP-accredited programs in the United States. Following institutional review board (IRB) approval, participants were drawn voluntarily through a convenience sampling method from an IRB-approved random pool of listservs, counseling association collections, social media postings, and approved university student portals. Participants were selected at random from CACREP-accredited institutions and consisted of master's level mental health counseling students attending online or campus-based mental health counseling programs in the United States. No identifying information was collected or stored. SurveyMonkey was selected as the delivery platform to disseminate and collect demographic, as well as SLRS-R2 data. The entire data collection process occurred over a 5-month period, ensuring an adequate sample size suitable for multiple regression analysis. Further requests to submit surveys on social media sites were limited by a nationwide COVID-19 pandemic. Potential participants were duly informed of the voluntary nature of the study and were asked to review an IRB approved cover statement. No external funding was used in this study.

Participants

From a total of 93 participants, 61 participants fully completed the online survey (65.5%). Incomplete surveys were discarded. Participants ($N = 61$) ranged from 22 states, with a majority of participants from the southeastern region of the United States ($N = 35$). Eighteen participants identified as male, and 40 identified as female. Most were between the ages of 18 and 29 (27.9%) and 40 to 49 (34.4%). Students identified as Caucasian/White (70.5%), Hispanic/Latino (19.7%), Black/African American (6.6%), or Multiple Races (3.3%).

Measures

The SLRS-R2 was developed by Astin (1996; Hevel et al., 2018) in collaboration with the Higher Education Research Institute and was designed to measure student values of the social change model of leadership development. The SRLS-R2 includes eight main variables: *Consciousness of Self*; *Congruence*; *Commitment*; *Common Purpose*; *Collaboration*; *Controversy with Civility*; *Citizenship*; and *Change*. The SRLS-R2 consists of 68-items, of which student participants respond using a 5-point Likert-type scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). The eight variables of the SRLS-R2 are grouped into two constructs—individual and group. Consciousness of Self (being self-aware of values and principles) and Congruence (thoughts, feelings, and behaviors towards others) were selected from the individual construct, and Change (action towards making the world a better place) was selected from the group construct, as these factors were most appropriate to the study.

Results

A Pearson product moment correlation analysis was performed and revealed a statistical correlation between SRLS-R2 predictor variables Change, Consciousness of Self, and Congruence and Gender. Table 2 displays the Pearson correlation outcomes. Table 3 displays the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) results for the SRLS-R2 constructs Change, Consciousness of Self, and Congruence.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation Outcomes

	P	G	A	R	C	CoS	Con.
P	1.00	.268	-.024	-.040	-.064	-.057	-.098
G	.268	1.000	-.219	-.019	.166	.067	.141
A	-.024	-.219	1.000	-.220	.383	.417	.034
R	-.040	-.019	-.220	1.000	-.077	-.168	-.141
C	-.064	.166	.383	-.077	1.000	.582	.327
CoS	-.057	.067	.417	-.168	.582	1.000	.397
Con.	-.098	.141	.034	-.141	.327	.397	1.000

Note. P = Pursue, G = Gender, A = Age, R = Race/Ethnicity, C = Change, CoS = Consciousness of Self, Con. = Congruence

Table 2. Means and Outcomes for Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (N = 61)

Socially Responsible Construct	M	SD
Change	39.0508	4.52740
Consciousness of Self	36.5254	4.69540
Congruence	29.9492	3.20788

Note. 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree or Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Multiple regression was chosen to determine whether or not SRLS scores for Change, Consciousness of Self, and Congruence, gender, and/or race predicted intent to pursue a doctoral degree among master's level mental health counseling students enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs. No statistically significant relationship was found between intent to pursue a doctoral degree (outcome variable) and the SRLS scores for Change, Consciousness of Self, and Congruence (SRLS-R2), and/or race (predictor variables). A non-significant regression equation was found $F(7, 51) = .895, p > 0.517$, with an $R^2 = .109$. Further statistical analysis revealed that gender accounts for a significant percentage of variance between the variables ($p < .027$) and intent to pursue a doctoral degree. Table 3 displays the statistical significance of gender.

Table 3. Model of Gender Significance

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients				
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Zero-order	Partial
Constant	3.329	1.431		2.326	.024		
Gender	.541	.237	.323	2.283	.027	.268	.305
Age	.057	.124	.076	.463	.645	-.024	.065
Race	-.019	.060	-.043	-.310	.758	-.040	-.043
Change	-.017	.036	-.086	-.481	.633	-.064	-.067
Consciousness of Self	-.007	.035	-.034	-.186	.853	-.057	-.026
Congruence	-.034	.043	.119	-.794	.431	-.098	-.110

Findings resulting from this empirical analysis revealed a majority (85.2%) of master's-level counseling students believed they possessed SRLS constructs of Change, Consciousness of Self, and Congruence, yet

further analysis revealed leadership constructs did not predict an intent to pursue further education in the form of a doctoral degree. Gender was a significant factor for pursuing a doctoral degree, as SRLS variables of Change, Consciousness of Self, and Congruence showed significant correlations between gender and ethnicity. However, further analysis suggested that gender did predict master's-level counseling students' intent to pursue doctoral degrees post-graduation. A multiple regression analysis following the correlation found gender to be a significant factor in predicting intent to pursue a doctoral degree. Specifically, males tended to choose to pursue a doctoral degree at a higher percentage than females and participants who identified as other.

Discussion

Leadership development is an important and complex endeavor for those preparing master's-level students for their professions (Balwant, 2016). Students without exposure to leadership ideas and activities in their coursework may struggle after graduation to be aware of or apply core leadership skills (Cauthen, 2016). Recent research highlights the need for infusing leadership coursework into the curriculum of master's-level counseling programs (Crisp & Alvarado-Young, 2018). Master's-level students from programs with leadership training are more likely to pursue a doctoral degree and/or seek leadership positions (Cauthen, 2016; Hinkle et al., 2014). Aarons et al. (2017) found that counselors with leadership positions often have doctoral degrees or 10 years or more of professional experience.

Findings from this quantitative study support current literature reporting "gender" as a significant factor for pursuing a doctoral degree. Specifically, SRLS variables of Change, Consciousness of Self, and Congruence showed significant correlations between Gender and Ethnicity. Multiple regression analysis provided statistical evidence of Gender as a significant factor, predicting intent to pursue a doctoral degree. Gender and Consciousness of Self displayed a significant correlation, as well as Gender and Congruence. Race and Consciousness of Self, as well as Race and Congruence, displayed a significant correlation. The variable Change had no significant correlation to Gender or Race. Further statistical analysis showed that males chose to pursue a doctoral degree at a higher percentage in comparison to females and participants who identified as *other*. This finding contradicts previous research reporting males pursue doctoral degrees at lower percentages than females (McCarthy, 2018; Perry, 2018). Additional statistical analysis showed that males aspire to pursue doctoral degrees in the field of leadership at a higher percentage than females or participants identified as other, which current research supports. Thus, the findings of this study both contradict and support previous research findings for students' pursuance of a doctoral degree post graduation and professional leadership aspirations post graduation.

In previous studies, SRLS scale scores for variables Change, Consciousness of Self, and Congruence indicated positive effects for student leadership identity development, whereas this study reported correlations between the independent variables. However, the results from the SRLS scale scores did not influence leadership identity post graduation. Previous study findings reported leadership curriculum integrated into university majors does influence professional leadership identity development of students, as well as enhances competence as a leader in their chosen profession post graduation (Crisp & Alvarado-Young, 2018).

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. Online surveys tend to pose challenges for the researcher, such as defining the population, respondent self-selection bias, low response rate, and others (Menon & Muraleedharan, 2020). This study focused on CACREP-approved programs, since this is the accreditation body for the field of counseling and it is reflected in most state licensure laws, at least to some extent. It might have been interesting to see how non-CACREP-approved graduates responded, but it seemed important to

focus on mainstream programs. Additionally, there were many possible bias limitations due to an inability to solicit participation from a broader range of sources since brick and mortar and online universities denied access to their students. COVID-19 was an ongoing issue during this time, and it may have limited accessibility in unforeseen ways. Using various online sources potentially limits the range of participants to those familiar with and using such systems. Finally, response bias in unknown ways can influence those that choose to respond and those that refuse to respond. Thus, the generalizability of the results from this study may be limited and further studies will need to be done to clarify this.

Conclusion

The emergence of leadership as a core counselor practice has become an increasingly important consideration for the field. Professional organizations support the need for formal training of counselors in preparation for leadership roles. In this study, however, students' knowledge on how leadership applies to future career aspirations could not be determined as a factor. An ancillary finding, aligning with previous statistical studies, showed that males who participated in this study tended to seek leadership positions at higher rates than their female counterparts, despite females comprising the majority of counseling students. It is imperative to address these gender-related selection factors to ensure that any barriers to leadership development are reduced or eliminated.

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