

Career Exploration Research Paper

Student Name

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## Introduction

I chose to pursue a career in counseling because the job field is very interesting to me. I hold mental health in high regard, and I want to do my part to help people cope with day-to-day life. There are roughly 450 million adults worldwide that suffer from a variety of mental illnesses, many of whom do not have easy access to treatment. Taking up a profession in counseling would be a service to my community and offer me a sense of purpose.

My mother is a social worker who operates her own private therapy practice, so I have had exposure to what life is like in that profession. I have also personally been in therapy for nearly six years and very much understand the role of the patient. Both my mother and my therapists over the years have certainly inspired me to follow them into the profession.

I believe a good number of people are averse to the idea of therapy because of the way it is portrayed in movies and television as well as the ignorant and negative way mental illness is portrayed. What many people need to realize is that nobody would have a negative reaction to somebody seeing a doctor for heart problems; therefore, seeing a medical professional about the most important and complicated organ in the body, the brain, is the logical thing to do. The brain cannot just be fixed by surgery or pills like some other organs in the body. Mental illness is an abstract type of illness that needs to be addressed externally and internally with as much priority as any other illness.

When I took the career aptitude test, I got several results based in the mental health field. My number one result was mental health nurse, and I believe that job would be a bad fit for me. Mental health nurses are there to help mitigate symptoms and insure that patients take their assigned medications. While the job is extremely important, and, without them, there would be a huge gap in mental health treatment, I simply am not interested in acting in that role. One of the

biggest reasons I am drawn to counseling is because each patient is different than the next, which means I will have the opportunity to try and figure out a new puzzle with every patient. This will ensure that I am not bored and there will always be something new to learn and explore.

#### Job Description/Education Required

I intend to pursue a job as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) in the state of Washington. The general day-to-day work for an LCSW depends a lot on what population and helping path they choose. For example, LCSWs who work in mental health, generally start their careers working in mental hospitals running group therapy sessions and occasionally one-on-one sessions with patients to help guide their recovery. A seasoned LCSW might then leave the hospital environment to start a private practice where they will conduct individual, couples, and/or family counseling sessions using various therapy methods such as cognitive behavioral therapy, schema therapy, and other evidence-based methods. LCSWs do not prescribe medicines and, therefore, generally just focus on cognitive or behavioral restructuring. I hope to follow this path, with the potential change of working in a substance abuse rehab center as I would like to focus on substance abuse treatment and recovery. I also plan to work in private practice, or a clinic, in order to have the flexibility of being my own boss as well as the ability to have a significant impact on clients over the long term.

In order to reach this goal, I will need a master's degree in social work as well as a passing grade on the LMSW exam to start working in a hospital or rehab facility under supervision. While I am working at the facility, I will also be working to satisfy the requirement of two years post master's supervision in the field of mental health. After I have completed this step, I will take the exam to become an LCSW. I can then open my own private practice if I choose to do so. I will likely go to a school in Washington to complete these steps to ensure that

I am meeting Washington state requirements. Throughout my career, I will be required to maintain ongoing education credits (CEUs). The average salary for a counselor in the state of Washington ranges from \$55,000 to \$80,000 a year (Salary: Clinical Social Worker in Washington State, 2018). The current job growth rate for social workers is 16%. This is significantly higher than the national average; however, all types of social workers are included in this number (Social workers, 2018). The average growth rate for mental health counselors is 23%, an even higher rate of growth than social work alone (Substance Abuse, Behavioral Disorder, and Mental Health Counselors, 2018). Each of these statistics shows encouraging growth and opportunity in my chosen field.

I believe I would be successful as a counselor because I possess many of the traits you would expect from a counselor: analytical, good listener, and direct. A good therapist also has a high level of self-awareness, good boundaries, and the ability to manage conflict and emotional discomfort. I believe that these are traits for which I have the raw material and can further develop with more education and experience. I believe my strong suit is interpersonal interaction and pairing that with the knowledge I will obtain through higher education, I will be fully prepared for my role as a counselor. I also have a significant understanding of what it means to be a patient in the mental health field and I have seen a variety of counseling methods. I hold high respect for the field and I have the ambition to make a difference. I am also very interested in how the mind works. I think this trait is particularly important as I want to find a line of work that will keep my interest for many years. As a social worker, I think I will also have an advantage as I am interested in different cultures and have a huge respect for how culture and environment impact a person's growth and development.

### A Day in the Life

For my professional interview, I spoke with Lisa Hobon, LCSW. She is a clinical social worker with a private practice in Crossroads, Texas. Prior to opening a private practice, she worked for five years in inpatient psychiatric hospitals where she worked as a therapist and program manager. She has opened her practice in 2010 in Denton and recently moved her practice to Crossroads. L. Hobon reported that an average day consists of seeing anywhere from 6 to 8 clients a day. Most of these clients are individuals, however she also sees couples and adult family members. She only treats adult and geriatric clients. The majority of these clients struggle with anxiety and/depression or are going through major life stressors. In between clients, she documents each session and submits billing to the insurance companies. Occasionally, she has to contact insurance companies to resolve billing issues and is sometimes called upon to complete FMLA paperwork for clients needing time off from work.

The type of therapy that she conducts is generally referred to as talk therapy or behavioral health therapy. She reported that she essentially assists clients in identifying and processing their treatment needs as well as in identifying behavioral and/or cognitive solutions. As a social worker, she generally operates from the standpoint of “start where the client is at” and utilizes interventions that help to empower the client to reach their stated goals. She utilizes cognitive behavioral methods as well as psychodynamic theories (L. Hobon, personal communication, November 14, 2018).

L. Hobon’s work environment is a private clinic where she has her own office and shares clinic space with a psychiatrist and a transcranial magnetic stimulation service. Her office environment closely resembles what someone’s home office or living room would look like. For the providers in the office who share clients, they collaborate on clinical information if a release

of information has been signed by the patient. The majority of her clientele comes to her office for their sessions, however she also sees a few clients through a telehealth (video) platform. All of her clients must be in Texas at the time of their session in order for her to be able to see them because her license only allows her to work in Texas (L. Hobon, personal communication, November 14, 2018). L. Hobon reported that she is entirely self-employed; therefore, she can set her schedule as she sees fit. She also does all her own scheduling and billing which can take up extra hours outside of the regular work day. She does not provide crisis management services; therefore all of her patients are seen during her posted hours only.

#### Positives/Challenges of the Profession Today

Healthcare, and access to healthcare, is going through significant changes. As a mental health provider, my job will be largely impacted by these changes. Most clients will utilize their insurance to pay for their sessions and how much the client will be required to pay out of pocket will dictate their treatment participation and compliance. Currently, the average healthcare deductible for an individual is \$4,358 and \$7,983 (Bloom, 2017). With many people required to meet their deductible before their insurance pays any portion of their treatment, this means that weekly, and possibly bi-weekly, sessions will be cost prohibitive. Luckily, some clients only have to pay a reasonable co-pay or are able to use free sessions covered by their insurance. One recent positive change in access to mental healthcare was the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Prior to the passage of this act, only approximately 20% of health plans covered mental health services. However, because of the ACA, insurance companies are now required to include mental health coverage (Affordable Care Act Expands Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Benefits and Federal Parity Protections for 62 Million Americans, 2013).

Unfortunately, the ACA has been continually challenged by certain lawmakers since its inception. Should this act be overturned, many people may lose valuable coverage.

Another concern for this career is the stigma surrounding mental health and mental health treatment. Many find it difficult to seek and utilize mental health treatment because of this stigma. The severity and nature of this stigma varies between genders and cultures. Studies have shown that white people are more likely to seek care than any other demographic, while Asians are least likely to seek care. Women seek care at a higher rate than men in almost every demographic (NAMI, 2018). On the positive side, younger generations appear to be seeking treatment more frequently than their parents or grandparents did. As stated above, the growth rate for this field is higher than the national job growth average which supports the research that more clients are seeking treatment than they have in the past. This is also likely due to the addition of mental health coverage to insurance plans.

#### Personal Assessment

A good counselor needs excellent communication skills, good understanding of cultural diversity and backgrounds, IT skills, solid analytical skills, and other general people skills. In addition to all of these things there are also certain personality traits and drives that a potential counselor should not have. A 2016 article published by the Federal College of Education identified several important skills that defined an effective counselor as well as several that indicated a poor fit for a career as a counselor. The identified that listening, confidentiality, compassion, self-awareness, tolerance, and critical thinking skills were skills most often associated with good counselors. Other traits, such as emotional instability, over identification with clients, and unaddressed negative life experiences would likely lead to ineffective, or potentially damaging, counseling outcomes (Oluwatoyin, 2016).

I would consider my dominant intelligence to be interpersonal. I do not, as stated in the *Cornerstones for College Success*, involve myself in a significant amount of socialization. I do, however, like to give and receive information, debate, and have in depth conversations (2014, p. 167). I am most confident in my ability to understand and empathize with others. I tend to learn best when I am able to see visual representations of concepts, or I am able to convert content into visual terms, therefore I am a visual learner (Sherfield & Moody, 2014, p. 169). According to the Myers-Briggs personality test, I have an introverted, intuitive, thinking, and judging (INTJ) personality type (It's so incredible to finally be understood, 2018).

Having a good understanding of people, an interest in interacting with people at a deep level, and an analytical drive will all help be to be a successful counselor. When I completed the online career assessment at the beginning of the semester, the results supported this assertion. Three out of the five results indicated a career in mental health with two of those specifically suggesting counseling (Potential starts here, 2018). Being an introvert would seem like it would be a hindrance to spending my days talking to people, however this would be an incorrect application of the word "introvert". Susan Cain studied introversion in an effort to clarify how introverts approach social situations and what it means to be an introvert. In her book *Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking*, she states that introverts enjoy social events, but prefer deeper conversation and smaller crowd sizes. She also points out that introverted people tend to think, or analyze, internally (2103). Therapy, and the therapeutic process, is uniquely suited to deep, meaningful conversations and analysis. The one learning area that may create a problem for me would be the fact that I am a visual learner. Much of therapy is listening and will need to hone my skills of converting auditory information to images in order to be able to fully comprehend what my clients are saying.

### From Here to There

After my research into this career, I still wish to pursue my goal of becoming a therapist. I will need to finish my associate degree at NCTC so that I can move on to a university to get my bachelor's degree in social work. I plan on transferring to TWU to accomplish this. After finishing this degree, I can sit for my Licensed Social Worker (LSW) exam and be a licensed social worker. At that point, I can begin working in a limited capacity in a mental health hospital in Texas, or another state if I transfer my license. I will not be able to provide counseling yet, but I would be able to work as a discharge planner or mental health technician. I will then need to continue my education to the master's level in order to be able to work in a counseling position, either on my own or with a facility. I have not decided where I will pursue my master's degree yet. After earning a graduate degree, I will sit for my Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW) exam. This will allow me to work as a counselor with supervision. Getting hired at a hospital will be my first priority as this will allow me to get the two years of supervision required to sit for my Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) exam. This license will allow me to operate independently and have my own private practice. Early in my four-year degree, I plan to join the National Association of Social Workers and will continue this affiliation during my graduate degree and career as they are a valuable resource for the required continuing education credits and malpractice insurance.

I have family in this career field as well as friends so taking advice and learning from their experiences will be a huge help to me as I learn my method of conducting therapy. My required time in the hospitals will allow me to gain experience in conducting individual and group sessions as well as give me exposure to a variety of treatment needs and methods. As

always, I will need to have good time management skills as I will be working full-time while going through school. I will also need to prioritize my goals so that I am able to get the right internships and take the right classes that will help me be successful in my career. Networking will also be an important skill to develop and I will need to be able to engage with other students and professionals to build that network. This class has allowed me to take an in depth look at this career and all the tiny details that come along with it. Knowing what I am walking into before I spend years, and thousands of dollars, on an education provides a level of comfort that I might not have had before.

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