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*Research Article*

## Exploring the Motivational Orientations of Counseling Graduate Students in Relation to Non-Counseling Graduate Students in the U.S.

Cebrail Karayigit<sup>1</sup>

*Pittsburg State University*

Waganesh Zeleke<sup>2</sup>

*Duquesne University*

Matthew Bundick<sup>3</sup>

*Duquesne University*

### Abstract

This quantitative study investigated different motivational orientations (e.g. intrinsic/extrinsic and approach/avoidance) held by counseling graduate students in relation to their level of education (e.g. master's and doctoral), and in relation to non-counseling graduate students. Using two well-validated measures of motivation -The Academic Motivation Scale (AMS, Vallerand, Pelletier, Blais, Briere, Senecal, & Vallieres, 1992) and Achievement Goal Questionnaire- Revised (AGQ- R, Elliot & Murayama, 2008), data were collected from graduate students ( $N= 205$ ) enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions. The findings revealed that counseling graduate students more frequently experience intrinsic and performance-approach motivation, and their motivational orientations vary based on their level of education. Finally, the study addresses some of its limitations and recommendations for future research based upon the results.

### Keywords

Motivational orientations • Counseling students • U.S.

<sup>1</sup>**Correspondance to:** Cebrail Karayigit, Department of Psychology & Counseling, Pittsburg State University, 1701 S. Broadway Pittsburg, KS, USA. Email: karayigitc@duq.edu **ORCID:** 0000-0002-9920-9642

<sup>2</sup>Duquesne University, Department of Counseling, Psychology and Special Education, Pittsburgh, PA, USA. Email: zelekew@duq.edu **ORCID:** 0000-0002-4604-336X

<sup>3</sup> Duquesne University, Department of Counseling, Psychology and Special Education, Pittsburgh, PA, USA. Email: bundickm@duq.edu **ORCID:** 0000-0001-9553-6534

Motivation is a state that an individual has the desire to act toward a goal. Research has generally supported the importance of motivation in academic achievement. Like any field of study, completing a graduate degree in counseling requires students to stay motivated. Although counseling programs provide a rich array of experiential learning and personal growth opportunities, the demand of time and energy that students need to put into their academic career can be an overwhelming experience (Hinkle, Iarussi, Shermer, & Yensel, 2014; Kottler & Spehard, 2014). Studies have documented the common challenges (e.g. anxiety, dealing with ambiguity) that counseling graduate students experience during their academic career (e.g., Christensen & Kline, 2001; Kottler & Spehard, 2014). Regardless of challenges and difficulties, the number of students enrolling and completing a graduate degree in counseling have been increasing steadily (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CARCEP], 2014; 2015). Although no data exist regarding completion rates between counseling graduate students and graduate students in other fields, this fact could create a desire knowing about the factors that keep students stay motivated to complete their education in the face of these challenges. There is little to no research that answer questions such as; what makes counseling graduate students persist in their graduate studies in the face of the known challenges?

The motivation to pursue and complete a graduate program can come from many different sources depending on level of education and different disciplines. Previous research has examined graduate students' motivation from different aspects. For instance, Hegarty, Brasco, and Lu (2012) measured the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of 113 graduate students. The result of this study indicated graduate students exhibit more extrinsic than intrinsic motivation in their studies. This research supported the notion that graduate students are not typically intrinsically motivated toward degree completion (Hegarty, 2010; Hegarty et al., 2012). Nolot (2011) suggested that the most influential motivational orientation to pursue graduate degree was professional advancement. Although the researcher did not categorize the professional advancement into intrinsic or extrinsic types of motivation, professional advancement factor included both intrinsic and extrinsic items such as to give me higher status in my job and to get a better job. Only few studies so far investigated motivational orientations of students who seek a graduate degree in a counseling or related field. In a study with doctoral students, Cardona (2013) found that students' motivation is different between four disciplines: Anthropology, Economics, Political Science, and Psychology. According to this study, Psychology participants were the most intrinsically motivated to complete doctoral degree. Hinkle et al. (2014) examined motivations in pursuing a doctoral degree in Counselor Education and Supervision. Their study revealed four motivations for pursuing a doctorate in Counselor Education and Supervision: a desire to be a professor in CES, a desire to prove oneself and work towards a secure professional future, a desire to be a clinical leader, and a desire to succeed for family and community.

While these studies provide information on graduate student motivation such as, to be a clinical leader or professor (Hinkle et al., 2014), professional advancement (Nolot, 2011), the type of motivation could be explained better based on Self Determination Theory (SDT) and Achievement Goal Theory. SDT has been considered as a major theory of motivation by many researchers (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2002). Although motivation has been considered as a single construct, it is important to understand there are different types of motivation (Oxford, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Ryan & Deci, 2000b). According to SDT, intrinsic motivation can be viewed as the performance of an activity to attain an external reward (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000b). For example, a doctoral counseling student can be motivated to

continue his/her studies for the sake of securing a job after graduation (extrinsic). On the other hand, he or she might want to pursue a degree in counseling to get a sense of achievement and personal satisfaction in his/her studies (intrinsic). Therefore, the orientation of motivation can be different based on what factors motivates students to pursue a degree in counseling.

The Achievement Goal theory is another framework that has been used widely to understand the construct of motivation. One of the components of this theory addresses the type of motivation from approach and avoidance factor. Approach and avoidance forms of achievements goals (Elliot, 1999, 2006; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996) is utilized as lens to understand the role of approach and avoidance motivation in counseling graduate students' persistence in their studies. The distinction between approach and avoidance motivation is not a new thing in the literature, beginning by the writings of the ancient Greek philosophers (Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Thrash, 2002; Elliot, 2006). Levin's (1935) conceptualization of positive and negative valences revealed the distinction between approach and avoidance motivation (as cited in Elliot & Covington, 2001). In terms of positive and negative valence, it is stated that "positive" and "negative" might refer to different meanings based on different contexts, such as beneficial/harmful or desirable/undesirable (Elliot, 2006). While energization and direction of behavior stems from positive events in the approach motivation, energization and direction of behavior stems from negative events in the avoidance motivation (Elliot, 2006). Interestingly, Elliot (2006) states that while approach motivation refers to thriving, avoidance motivation refers to surviving. In this concept, a recent study shows that although avoidance motivation is associated with negative consequences, it can be helpful to survive in some critical situations (Roskes, Elliot & De Dreu, 2014). For example, a graduate student may be motivated to prevent an undesirable possibility, which is the possibility of not being able to finish his/her degree. In this example, although avoidance motivation allows the student to keep studying and finishing his/her degree, Elliot (2006) stated that it can be a stressful experience because of using a negative object as the hub of regulatory activity.

### **Current Study**

The lack of research and available literature on the motivational orientation of counseling graduate students in the U.S. raises a fundamental question about how counseling graduate students persist in their education. To better understand the factors affecting persistence of counseling graduate students, it is important to explore whether counseling graduate student have different motivational orientation than graduate students in other fields. In other words, how do different types of motivation explain counseling graduate students' motivation to persist in their studies? From that broad question, two specific questions emerged:

1. Is there a difference in the levels of different types of motivational orientations between counseling-related graduate students and non-counseling graduate students?
2. Is there a difference in the levels of different types of motivational orientations between master's level counseling graduate students and doctoral counseling graduate students?

Hence, this study aimed to explore how different types of motivation contribute counseling graduate students' motivation toward degree completion in relation to the level of education, and in relation to graduate students in other fields. The type and level of motivation are defined and measured based Self-Determination Theory and Achievement goal theory.

## Method

### Participants

This study employs a quantitative research design intended to examine counseling graduate students' motivations to continue their education in the U.S in relation to non-counseling graduate students. Convenience stratified sampling method was utilized to collect data. Participants were recruited via graduate student listservs (e.g. CESNET) and Facebook groups. The present study included a sample of  $N=205$  graduate students enrolled in higher educational institutions from across the United States. Of the 205 participants in the survey, the majority of participants identified as counseling graduate students (58%) and female (56%). Only 6 participants did not identify their gender. See Table 1 for more details on participants' demographic characteristics.

The breakdown of participants by level of education consisted of 71 students who were enrolled in a doctoral degree program in counseling or a related field and 49 students who were enrolled in a master's degree program in counseling or a related field. As noted in the Table I, the majority of participants (59.2%) were enrolled in master's degree program in counseling or related fields. Of the 120 participants in counseling or related fields, 109 of them indicated their field of study as various counseling fields (e.g., school counseling, family counseling). The other 11 participants constituted fields related to counseling: 4 were in Special Education field, 3 were in Psychology, 2 were in Clinical Psychology, and 2 were in Rehabilitation Science. Remaining 85 graduate students constituted other fields (e.g. Computer Science, Biology, and Chemistry) that are not related to counseling field.

Table 1  
*Demographic data of study population*

| Value                  | Frequency        | Percent |
|------------------------|------------------|---------|
| Field of Study         |                  |         |
| Counseling and Related | 120              | 58.5    |
| Non-counseling         | 85               | 41.5    |
| Level of Education     |                  |         |
| Masters                | 71               | 59.2    |
| Doctoral               | 49               | 40.8    |
| Gender <sup>a</sup>    |                  |         |
| Female                 | 111              | 55.8    |
| Male                   | 88               | 44.2    |
| Total                  | 205 <sup>a</sup> | 100.0   |

<sup>a</sup> Six respondents choose not to provide a response to this question.

### Measures

Data were collected using two standardized assessment scale: The Academic Motivation Scale (AMS, Vallerand at al., 1992) and Achievement Goal Questionnaire- Revised (AGQ- R, Elliot & Murayama, 2008), using 5-point Likert-type responses. Although AMS contains 28 items has 7 subscales, only 4 items from the intrinsic motivation subscale and 4 items from the extrinsic motivation subscale were used in this study. A sample item from AMS is "because I experience pleasure and satisfaction while learning new things". AGQ-R is a 12-item questionnaire, which includes 6 items on approach goals (mastery-approach and performance-approach), and 6 items on avoidance goals (mastery-avoidance and performance-avoidance) on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). A sample item from AGQ-R is "I am striving to avoid performing worse than other graduate students." Traditionally, AMS has been used to measure college students'

motivational orientation. However, some small changes were made on both scales to better fit the graduate student population (e.g., “college degree” was changed to “graduate degree”).

### Data Analysis

SPPS software was used to analyze the data. To examine the research questions, a series of independent *t*-test was conducted to assess if levels of different types of motivational orientations (intrinsic, extrinsic, mastery, avoidance) differ between international graduate students and domestic graduate students.

### Results

The scores from all four subscales were used to address the first research question. An independent *t*-test was conducted to assess if levels of different types of motivational orientations (intrinsic, extrinsic, approach, avoidance) differ between counseling graduate students and non-counseling graduate students. As shown in Table 2, counseling graduate students ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ) were significantly higher in their mean level of intrinsic motivation than non-counseling graduate students ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ),  $t(200) = 2.173$ ,  $p = 0.03$ . However, there were no significant differences between counseling graduate students and non-counseling graduate students on levels of extrinsic motivation ( $t(198) = 0.281$ ,  $p = 0.77$ ), approach motivation ( $t(203) = 0.183$ ,  $p = 0.85$ ), and avoidance motivation ( $t(203) = -0.437$ ,  $p = 0.66$ ). Further, while the effect size for intrinsic motivation was  $d = .31$ , which is considered a small to medium effect size using Cohen's (1988) criteria. The effect sizes (Cohen's  $d$ ) for other three sub-scales were all low at  $d = .04$ ,  $d = .02$ , and  $d = .06$  respectively.

Table 2

*T-Test: Motivation by Field of Study*

|           | Student Status | <i>N</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>SEM</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-----------|----------------|----------|----------|-----------|------------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Intrinsic | Counseling     | 118      | 4.071    | 0.641     | 0.059      | 2.173    | 200       | 0.031    |
|           | Non-counseling | 84       | 3.866    | 0.689     | 0.075      |          |           |          |
| Extrinsic | Counseling     | 116      | 3.713    | 0.903     | 0.083      | 0.281    | 198       | 0.779    |
|           | Non-counseling | 84       | 3.675    | 0.987     | 0.107      |          |           |          |
| Approach  | Counseling     | 120      | 4.218    | 0.852     | 0.077      | 0.183    | 203       | 0.855    |
|           | Non-counseling | 85       | 4.198    | 0.709     | 0.076      |          |           |          |
| Avoidance | Counseling     | 120      | 3.825    | 0.934     | 0.085      | -0.437   | 203       | 0.662    |
|           | Non-counseling | 85       | 3.880    | 0.833     | 0.090      |          |           |          |

The scores from all four subscales were used to address the second research question. An independent *t*-test was conducted to assess if levels of different types of motivational orientations (intrinsic, extrinsic, approach, avoidance) differ between master's level counseling students and doctoral level counseling students. As shown in Table 3, doctoral counseling students ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ) were significantly lower in their mean level of avoidance motivation than master's level counseling students ( $M = 3.97$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ),  $t(118) = 2.102$ ,  $p = 0.03$ . However, there were no significant differences between master's level counseling students and doctoral level counseling students on levels of intrinsic motivation ( $t(116) = -0.168$ ,  $p = 0.86$ ), extrinsic motivation ( $t(114) = -1.205$ ,  $p = 0.23$ ), and approach motivation ( $t(118) = 1.620$ ,  $p = 0.10$ ). Further, while the effect size for avoidance motivation and approach motivation were a small to medium at  $d = .39$  and  $d = .29$  using Cohen's (1988) criteria. The effect sizes (Cohen's  $d$ ) for other two sub-scales (intrinsic and extrinsic) were all low at  $d = -.03$ , and  $d = -.23$  respectively.

Table 3

*T-Test: Motivation by Level of Education*

| Student Status |          | <i>N</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>SEM</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> |
|----------------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|------------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Intrinsic      | Master's | 70       | 4.063    | 0.663     | 0.079      | -0.168   | 116       | 0.867    |
|                | Doctoral | 48       | 4.083    | 0.615     | 0.088      |          |           |          |
| Extrinsic      | Master's | 68       | 3.628    | 0.877     | 0.106      | -1.205   | 114       | 0.231    |
|                | Doctoral | 48       | 3.833    | 0.934     | 0.134      |          |           |          |
| Approach       | Master's | 71       | 4.322    | 0.788     | 0.093      | 1.620    | 118       | 0.108    |
|                | Doctoral | 49       | 4.068    | 0.926     | 0.132      |          |           |          |
| Avoidance      | Master's | 71       | 3.971    | 0.878     | 0.104      | 2.102    | 118       | 0.038    |
|                | Doctoral | 49       | 3.612    | 0.979     | 0.139      |          |           |          |

The goal of this study was to examine different types of motivational orientations (namely intrinsic, extrinsic, approach, and avoidance) that contribute counseling graduate students' motivation to continue their education. Emphasis was placed on the differences between specific groups of graduate students (e.g., master's degree and doctoral degree, counseling and non-counseling students). Since counseling is a profession with many intrinsically rewarding experiences without great financial rewards (Hutchinson, 2014), counseling graduate students were expected to have significantly higher mean of intrinsic motivation and lower mean of extrinsic motivation compared to non-counseling graduate students. Results of the study supported one hypothesis and did not support the other hypothesis. While the study found that counseling graduate students had significantly higher mean levels of intrinsic motivation, the notion that counseling graduate students have significantly lower mean levels of extrinsic motivation were not supported. One possible explanation for this might be that extrinsic motivation is commonly used by graduate students in general to continue their education and reach their goals (see Takashiro, 2017).

The current research study was also one of the few studies that examined if master's level counseling graduate students and doctoral level counseling graduate students differ on their levels of different motivational orientations to continue their education. Doctoral counseling graduate students were expected to have significantly higher mean of intrinsic motivation compared to master's level graduate students, but this hypothesis was not supported. Additionally, the notion that doctoral counseling graduate students were expected to have significantly lower mean of avoidance motivation compared to master's level graduate students was supported. In other words, the current findings suggest the possibility that master's level counseling students more frequently experience avoidance motivation. One possible explanation for this might be that master's level counseling students are more focused on surviving rather than professional excellence since avoidance motivation typically refers to *surviving* (Elliot, 2006). In this situation, we can assume that master's level counseling students' behavior is more frequently directed by an undesirable possibility (e.g. not being able to finish their degree) than doctoral level counseling students. In this example, although avoidance motivation allows a master's level counseling student to keep studying, Elliot (2006) stated that it could be a stressful experience because of using a negative object as the hub of regulatory activity. Though not expected, this result might also be explained by the possibility that master's level students' experiences (e.g., financial difficulties, lack of a strong relationship with mentors/advisors) are more powerful in leading them to experience avoidance motivation. On the other hand, this study supported the notion that doctoral level counseling students are not typically motivated by the idea of surviving (e.g. avoidance motivation) compared to master's level counseling

students. This finding is also consistent with [Nolot \(2011\)](#) study highlighting “the professional advancement” and with [Hinkle et al. \(2014\)](#) study documenting that counseling doctoral students are motivated by “a desire to be a professor”. We can assume that it is more likely that doctoral counseling students are focused on “thriving” rather than “surviving” mode in their studies. One possible explanation for this might be that doctoral level students usually have a stronger relationship with their advisors, which lead to less frequently avoidance motivation. In this concept. This is consistent with [Protivnak and Foss \(2009\)](#) study, which identified several factors (e.g. mentoring and support system) that positively influences experiences of counseling doctoral students. Future research might focus on understanding if approach and avoidance motivation can be triggered by different factor (e.g., academic support, mentoring, peer support), instead of focusing on only level of education. The lack of support in this study for the existing research findings regarding extrinsic and approach motivation could also be due to another form of sample difference between the current and existing studies, specifically that the current study examined differences in within graduate student population. Previous studies typically did not include graduate students, but rather undergraduate college students ([Rock & Janoff-Bulman, 2010](#); [Rosas, 2015](#)).

### Conclusion

Understanding counseling graduate students’ motivational orientation is critical. The purpose of this study was to investigate different types of psychologically based motivational factors that contribute to counseling graduate students’ motivation toward completing their programs, in particular in relation to non-counseling graduate students and in relation to their level of education. The findings generally support the notion that counseling graduate students more frequently experience intrinsic motivation. The presence of a few statistically significant findings also suggests counseling graduate students’ motivational orientations vary based on their level of education, which provides a preliminary basis for future research in this area. The present study represents a starting point in this promising line of inquiry. However, given its limitations, further research of counseling graduate students is thus necessary to better understand the potential link between motivational orientations and their future career path.

The findings from this study provided broad support for the notion that there is significant results that it may still be important to explore further understanding of the differences in their level of motivation among counseling graduate students. Future investigation is needed to better understand counseling graduate students’ motivation from a broader perspective by utilizing an alternative data collection method and refining research design. For example, in addition to quantitative aspect of this study, a qualitative method such as interviews could be adopted with a subsample of the respondents to explore counseling graduate students’ motivation to continue their education more in depth. Another recommendation for future research would be to examine the relationship between different types of motivational orientations (e.g., avoidance motivation) and career path (e.g., to be an academic, to be a practitioner). Therefore, future studies can illustrate the potential link between the types of motivation and other factors (e.g. counseling professional identity) that may also influence graduate students' motivation to continue their education.

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