

**Exploration of Potential Predictor Variables**

**Leading to School Counselor Burnout**

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## **Abstract**

Job stress and burnout negatively impact school counselors and the school communities in which they serve. This study explores variables previously indicated by the literature as potentially contributing to school counselor job stress or burnout. These include size of caseload, location of school (urban, suburban, rural), grade level served (elementary, middle, high school), and counselor ethnicity. Although we found some significant ethnic differences in development of job stress; overall, our findings contradicted the literature on each of these variables. We explore reasons for differences in findings and make suggestions for future research.

*Keywords:* school counselor burnout; job stress; ethnicity, school location, grade level, caseload

## **Exploration of Potential Predictor Variables Leading to School Counselor Burnout**

Burnout among mental health counselors, psychologists, and social workers is well documented (Bährer-Kohler, 2013; Martin, Karanika-Murray, Biron, & Sanderson, 2016; Roncalli & Byrne, 2016; Skovholt, 2001; Whitebird, Asche, Thompson, Rossom, & Heinrich, 2013). Teachers and school administrators suffering from burnout is similarly well researched (Banerjee & Mehta, 2016; Brock & Grady, 2002; Lauermann & Konig, 2016; Mazidi, Khoshbakht, & Alborzi, 2017). Given that school counselors work in both the mental health and education professions, it is logical to conclude that school counselors are also at risk of developing burnout. Although the subject has been identified as a major concern at conferences, exploration of the topic in professional literature has been limited, with only two studies published in the past five years (Bardhoshi, Schweinle, & Duncan, 2014; Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016).

Job stress, long understood to be an antecedent to burnout, is characterized by experiencing high external demands with little control and low support often resulting from role ambiguity, role conflict, and work overload (Karasek, 1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Perrewe & Ganster, 2010; Quick, Quick, Nelson, & Hurrell, 1997; Selye, 1976; Van Der Velde & Class, 1995). Consistent with this definition, the literature indicates that school counselors experience high levels of competing demands from a variety of stakeholders (administrators, teachers, parents, students, and the profession itself) over which they have little control (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Byrne, 1999; Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005). This coupled with variable levels of support, results in role ambiguity, role conflict, and work overload (Falls &

Nichter, 2007; Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Byrne, 1999; Culbreth et al., 2005). The relationship between job stress and burnout is supported by school counselor burnout literature (Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016).

It is important to understand that there are documented negative personal, mental, emotional, and physical effects to those experiencing job stress and burnout (Bahrer-Kohler, 2013; Falls & Nichter, 2007; Hopkins, 2015; Ozen et al., 2008; Perrewe & Ganster, 2010; Roncalli & Byrne, 2016). Additionally, there are significant negative effects on the organizations (schools) and clients (students) for whom “burned-out” individuals’ work (Banerjee & Mehta, 2016; Falls & Nichter, 2007; Hopkins, 2015; Martin et al., 2016; Perrewe & Ganster, 2010; Simendinger & Moore, 1985). Given that school counselors experience both job stress (SCJS) and burnout (SCBO), and their development of each contributes to negative personal and organizational impacts, we believe it is important to identify potential variables which contribute to the development of SCJS and SCBO, which may be informative in developing future prevention and intervention efforts.

### **Potential Antecedents to School Counselor Burnout**

Existing literature suggests certain demographic variables may contribute to development of job stress and burnout. However, we could not locate any studies systematically evaluating those variables in relationship to the job stress and burnout constructs. One of these factors is the size of the school counselor’s caseload. ASCA recommends professional school counselor caseloads of no more than 250 students per counselor, for optimal service to be offered to the students they serve. A study by Paisley and McMahon (2001) also suggested that job overload, a precursor to job stress

is positively related to high counselor-student caseloads. Finally, two recent studies, although not focused specifically on demographic variables included examinations of caseload size, indicating it as a variable that may predict SCBO (Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Moyer, 2011). For these reasons, we chose to explore the impact of caseload size on levels of SCJS and SCBO.

Research also suggests ethnic differences may explain development in job stress among some school counselors. In one study, Hispanic counselors surveyed in Texas reported a significantly higher preference for conducting appropriate counseling duties and a desire for lower levels of non-counseling duty assignments (Nelson, Robles-Pina, & Nichter, 2008). In light of the research indicating that the assignment of non-counseling duties has been linked to increased levels of job stress (DeMato & Curcio, 2004; Moyer, 2011) and job dissatisfaction (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006), both precursors to burnout, (Demerouti, Nachreiner, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2001; Quick et al., 1997; Sauter & Murphy, 1995) suggests that ethnic differences may impact levels of job stress and burnout. Therefore, we chose to examine differences in ethnicity in relationship to SCJS & SCBO.

Additionally, several studies indicate the possibility that the grade level in which school counselors' work may explain some of the differences in who develops higher levels of job stress and burnout. Rayle's (2006) study indicates significant differences in job satisfaction, a precursor to job stress, among school counselors working at the elementary school level (high) and those working at the high school level (low). The variance was attributed to the amount of time the spent counseling related activities rather than non-counseling duties. Two additional studies found that high school

counselors reported significantly higher levels of role conflict, a contributing factor to job stress, because they were assigned both counseling and non-counseling duties (Culbreth et al., 2005; Roaten, Leggett, & Ybanez, 2008). Finally, DeMato and Curcio (2004) also found that elementary school counselors in Virginia reported high levels of job satisfaction, which further supports the suggestion that grade level may impact the counselor's development of job stress and burnout. Therefore, the grade level that the counselor is serving is another variable we decided to explore.

Similarly, the location of the school in which counselors work (urban, suburban, rural) has been suggested as a potential reason some school counselors develop burnout. Butler and Constantine (2005) found that counselors in urban environments demonstrated significantly higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization on the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey (MBI-ES) indicating two of the three elements of burnout were present. The researchers attributed this to the low socioeconomic status (SES) and higher needs of their students. Although the current study does not explore reasons for differing levels of job stress and burnout, we decided to include the location of the school (urban, suburban, rural) as a potential contributing variable to SCJS and SCBO.

Finally, length of time spent working as a school counselor was suggested as a potential contributing variable to SCJS and SCBO. Studies indicate that school counselors reported lower levels of job stress (Culbreth et al., 2005) and burnout (Moyer, 2011) when their perception of job expectations matched the assigned job duties, regardless of whether they were counseling or non-counseling job duties. Nelson et al. (2008) indicated that school counselors who had longer tenures in education

experienced less cognitive dissonance between their perceptions of preferred duties and actual duties assigned, suggesting that length of time as a school counselor may indicate varying levels of SCJS & SCBO. Additionally, an earlier qualitative study we conducted (Falls & Nichter, 2007) found that the cognitive dissonance between graduate school training and actual job duties assigned increased the levels of job stress and burnout experienced by Texas high school counselors interviewed. Perhaps the strongest evidence is a Butler and Constantine (2005) study, which reported that school counselors with more than 20 years' experience reported higher levels of burnout than did school counselors with less than 10 years' experience. Therefore, we chose to examine the relationship between the number of years a professional school counselor worked in education as related to reported levels of job stress and burnout.

Although we were able to find three recent studies exploring assignment of non-counseling duties in relationship school counselor burnout (Bardhoshi, Schweinle, & Duncan, 2014; Moyer, 2011; Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016), we were unable to find any that systematically analyzed each of the demographic variables that have been suggested by the literature to contribute to higher levels of job stress or burnout. Thus, the gap in existing research indicates a need to study the relationship between these specific variables and SCJS and SCBO, in order to more fully understand the developmental path of SCBO for future monitoring and prevention planning.

This study is part of a larger study intended to identify predictor variables to include in a multiple regression analysis of SCBO. We delimited this study to focus solely on exploring the relationships between those variables identified in the literature (caseload, ethnicity, grade level, school location, and number of years of school

counseling experience) to levels of job stress and burnout among school counselors.

We acknowledge there may be additional relevant variables that contribute to SCJS and SCBO not previously identified, which may warrant future exploration.

### **Method**

The seminal research on job stress indicates that it is a result of a demand (stressor), positive or negative, on a person's physical or mental state (Quick et al., 1997; Selye, 1976). Further, chronic, or ongoing, job stress is a documented antecedent to burnout (Ahola et al., 2006; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Martin et al., 2016; Whitebird et al., 2013). As a result, we determined that each of the variables we studied should be significant for both job stress and burnout, in order to be included as predictor variables in a future equation for predicting SCBO. Therefore, we examined the relationship between each variable and job stress as measured by the Demand Control Support Questionnaire (Karasek & Theorell, 1990) However, we also studied each variable in relationship to the burnout construct as measured by the Counselor Burnout Inventory (Lee et al., 2007).

### **Research Questions**

We have two research questions: (a) what is the difference between demographic variables (ethnicity, number of years in education, grade level of school, location of school, and caseload) and job stress, as measured by the Demand Control Support Questionnaire (DCSQ), among professional school counselors surveyed?; and (b) what is the difference between demographic variables (ethnicity, number of years in education, grade level of school, location of school, and caseload) and burnout, as



measured by the Counselor Burnout Inventory (CBI), among professional school counselors surveyed?

### **Participants**

We used a criterion sampling strategy to choose only people working currently as school counselors in public K-12 schools in Texas. We further determined that we wanted to use a state department of education database to gather the sample, rather than using the membership database for a professional school counseling organization. Our assumption was that this would improve the chances of gaining a representative sample of school counselors who may suffer from high levels of job stress and/or burnout because these counselors may be less likely to be actively involved in a professional organization. We based this assumption on existing literature indicating that people experiencing high levels of job stress and burnout tend to become professionally disengaged (Demerouti et al., 2001; Golembiewski & Munzenrider, 1988; Hopkins, 2015; Maslach, 1982).

To determine the number of participants needed, we conducted a power analysis and discovered that to have sufficient power with a medium effect size at a .05 level we would need a maximum of 132 participants to conduct the tests chosen for data analysis (Olejnik, 1984). To reach this number we obtained e-mail lists of 235 directors of guidance from the Texas Association of Counselor Educators and Supervisors, of 3016 principals and district administrators from the Texas Education Agency and utilized our personal and professional contacts as a former school counselor and current counselor educator to form a third list of 60 individuals. Utilizing snowball

sampling, we also requested that these individuals forward the survey to any school counselor in the state of Texas who may be willing to participate.

After eliminating any surveys with missing data, we obtained a non-random sample of 449 participants. The sample was representative of the population of school counselors in Texas including 81% White, 10% Black, and 9% Hispanic. The counselors had an average of 13 years' experience in education and a mean age of 44. Almost half (43%) of the counselors reported having five years or less experience as a school counselor, while 25% reported six to ten years' experience, and 32% reported over ten years. The majority of participants reported having masters' degrees (93%). Thirty-five percent were high school counselors, 22% worked in middle schools, and 43% worked in elementary schools. The majority (47%) worked in suburban areas, while urban (26%) and rural (28%) counselors, were relatively evenly distributed. Over half of our participants (53%) reported caseloads of over 400 students, stepping down to 35% with 251-400 students, and only 11% reported caseloads of less than 250. The population size of schools ranged from 100-3400 students, and the average annual salary for counselors was \$55,000.

## **Instruments**

We used three instruments including a demographic survey, the Demand Control Support Questionnaire (Karasek et al., 1998; Karasek & Theorell, 1990) to measure job stress, and the Counselor Burnout Inventory (Gnilka, Karpinski, & Smith, 2015; Lee et al., 2007) to measure burnout.

**Demographic questionnaire.** The first author designed a demographic survey including general sample characteristics for descriptive purposes, as well as for

potential differentiation between groups, such as age, gender, and ethnicity. The survey gathered information regarding potentially confounding variables related to both the individual and the workplace environment. The variables included number of years in education, grade level, location of school, total number of students in school, and caseload number. A panel of experts reviewed the instrument, including 12 school counselors with experience ranging from 5 years to 20 years, we incorporated their suggestions in the instrument, which was then reviewed again by the panel of experts.

**Demand Control Support Questionnaire** (Karasek et al., 1998; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). The DCSQ is a 30-item scale measuring “psychological work demands, job control and workplace social support” (Williams, Sundelin, & Schmuck, 2001, p. 71). Each item has a statement on a 4 point Likert-type scale: 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*agree*), and 4 (*strongly agree*). It is self-administered, taking approximately 15 minutes to complete (Karasek et al., 1998). The subscales include Decision Latitude (9 questions total for both subscales, scores range from 9 to 36), Psychological Demands and Mental Workload (9 questions, scores range from 9 to 36), Supervisor Social Support (5 questions, scores range from 5 to 20), Co-worker Social Support (6 questions, scores range from 6 to 24), and one question from the Job Insecurity subscale (Karasek et al., 1998). It is important to note that some items are reversed scored. Once the subscales are scored or reverse scored, as appropriate, those subscales with higher numbers are considered to indicate higher levels of stress (Karasek et al., 1998).

The Psychological Demands and Mental Workload subscale includes items such as whether the job requires the employee to “work fast” or “work hard;” whether the

employee perceives that there is “no excessive work,” “enough time” to complete tasks, whether they experience “conflicting demands,” frequent “task interruption,” believe the job is “hectic,” or that they have to “wait on others” (Karasek et al., 1998). The amount of perceived control an employee has is measured by the Decision Latitude subscale, which is actually a combined score from two other subscales: Skill Discretion and Decision Authority. Skill Discretion includes statements regarding whether the participant’s work includes “learning new things,” “repetitive work,” “requires creativity,” requires a “high level of skill,” contains “variety,” and allows the participant to “develop own abilities.” The Decision Authority subscale includes items regarding whether the job “allows own decisions,” contains “little decision freedom,” and allows the employee “a lot of say” (Karasek et al., 1998).

The ‘support’ variable is measured by two subscales: Supervisor Social Support and Co-worker Social Support. The Supervisor Social Support construct is measured by items such as whether the employee perceives that the “supervisor is concerned” about the employee, whether the “supervisor pays attention” to the employee, whether the supervisor is “hostile” or “helpful,” and whether the supervisor is a “good organizer.” The Co-worker Social Support Subscale measures whether the employee perceives his or her co-workers as “competent,” “interested in me,” “hostile,” “friendly,” “helpful,” and whether they “work together” (Karasek et al., 1998). We also included one item regarding perceived job security because DeMato and Curcio (2004) indicated that job insecurity was a “considerable source of stress” (p. 242) for professional school counselors surveyed. The principal author of the instrument also recommended use of the Job Insecurity subscale due to recent evidence that this may be a variable of

increasing concern in the United States (Karasek et al., 1998). In their two-year longitudinal test, de Jonge, van Vegchel, Shimazu, Schaufeli, and Dormann (2010) indicated significant demand/control interaction for emotional and mental demands. They concluded that longitudinal testing supported the core assumptions of the demand-control model.

**Counselor Burnout Inventory** (Gnilka et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2007). The CBI has 20 questions respondents rate on a Likert scale as follows: 1 = never true, 2 = rarely true, 3 = sometimes true, 4 = often true, and 5 = always true (Lee et al., 2007). Initial psychometric data supporting the CBI's use with counselors included an exploratory factor analysis to establish construct validity and identify five factors, then a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted with a second sample to confirm the five-factor structure (Lee et al., 2007). Internal consistency is .94 for the overall scale with subscales ranging from .73-.85. Test-retest reliability is .81. Convergent validity was established with the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Lee et al., 2007).

The instrument has five factors, which include both individual and organizational dimensions of burnout, as follows. Negative Work Environment, includes four items: item three, "I am treated unfairly in my workplace;" item eight, "I feel negative energy from my supervisor;" item thirteen, "I feel bogged down by the system in my workplace;" and item eighteen, "I feel frustrated with the system in my workplace" (Lee et al., 2007). Exhaustion, consisting of four items: item one, "Due to my job as a counselor, I feel tired most of the time;" item six, "I feel exhausted due to my work as a counselor;" item eleven, "Due to my job as a counselor, I feel overstressed;" and item sixteen, "Due to my job as a counselor, I feel tightness in my back and shoulders."

Deterioration in Personal Life, also measured by four items: item five, “My relationships with family members have been negatively impacted by my work as a counselor;” item ten, “I feel like I do not have enough time to engage in personal interests;” item fifteen, “I feel I do not have enough time to spend with my friends;” and item twenty, “I feel I have poor boundaries between work and my personal life” (Lee et al., 2007). Devaluing Client is measured with four items: item four, “I am not interested in my clients and their problems;” item nine, “I have become callous toward clients;” item fourteen, “I have little empathy for my clients;” and finally item nineteen, “I am no longer concerned about the welfare of my clients” (Lee et al., 2007). The final scale is Incompetence, consisting of four items: item two, “I feel I am an incompetent counselor;” item seven, “I feel frustrated by my effectiveness as a counselor;” item twelve, “I am not confident in my counseling skill;” and item seventeen, “I do not feel like I am making a change in my clients.” (Lee et al., 2007).

### **Data Analysis**

After establishing that the data met assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity, we conducted the following tests to enable us to analyze the data. To answer research question one, we first conducted a 2 x 3 x 3 Factorial ANOVA with Tukey’s post hoc test to examine the impact of two independent variables (IV) including number of years’ experience in education (0-5, 6-10, 11+) and caseload size (0-250, 251-400, 400+) on the DCSQ total scores. We evaluated whether there were interaction effects between the two IVs. In order to have sufficient power with a medium effect size at a .05 level, we needed 126 participants to conduct this test (Olejnik, 1984). Next, we conducted a 3 x 3 x 3 Factorial ANOVA with Tukey’s post hoc test to examine the

impact of the IVs including grade level (elementary, middle, high school), school location (urban, suburban, rural), and ethnicity (White, Black, Hispanic) on the DCSQ total scores and evaluated whether there were interaction effects between the three independent variables (IVs).

To answer research question two, we similarly conducted a 2 x 3 x 3 Factorial ANOVA with Tukey's post hoc test to examine the impact of two IVs, number of years' experience in education (0-5, 6-10, 11+) and caseload size (0-250, 251-400, 400+); however, this time the dependent variable (DV) changed to the CBI total scores. Additionally, we evaluated whether there were interaction effects between the two IVs. We then conducted a 3 x 3 x 3 Factorial ANOVA with Tukey's post hoc test to examine the impact of grade level (elementary, middle, high school), location the school (urban, suburban, rural), and ethnicity (White, Black, Hispanic) on the CBI total scores and evaluated whether there were interaction effects between the three independent variables (IVs).

## Results

When we conducted the 2 x 3 x 3 factorial ANOVA to answer the first part of question one there were no main effects or interactions found. The main effect for the first IV, total years educational experience  $F(2,448) = .555, p > .05, \eta^2 = .003$ ; for the second IV, caseload,  $F(2, 448) = .261, p > .05, \eta^2 = .001$ ; nor for the interaction between total years educational experience and caseload  $F(4, 448) = .241, p > .05, \eta^2 = .001$  were significant, and effect sizes were small. Total scores on the DCSQ were not influenced by caseload, number of years' experience, or the combination of the two.

The 3 x 3 x 3 factorial ANOVA conducted to answer the second part of question one also indicated no main effects or interactions. The main effect for the first IV, ethnicity,  $F(2, 448) = .037, p > .05, \eta^2 = .000$ ; for the second IV, grade level,  $F(2, 448) = 1.293, p > .05, \eta^2 = .006$ ; for the third IV, location  $F(2, 448) = .303, p > .05, \eta^2 = .001$ ; for ethnicity and grade level interaction  $F(4, 448) = .519, p > .05, \eta^2 = .005$ ; for ethnicity and location interaction  $F(4, 448) = 1.242, p > .05, \eta^2 = .012$ ; for grade level and location interaction  $F(4, 448) = .666, p > .05, \eta^2 = .006$ ; nor for ethnicity, grade level, and location interaction  $F(7, 448) = 1.831, p > .05, \eta^2 = .029$  were significant, and effect sizes were small. Total scores on the DCSQ were not influenced by ethnicity of the counselor, grade level of the student with whom the counselor worked, location of school where the counselor worked, or any combination of these variables.

The 2 x 3 x 3 factorial ANOVA conducted to answer the first part of question two indicated there were no main effects or interactions found. The main effect for the first IV, total years educational experience  $F(2,448) = .111, p > .05, \eta^2 = .001$ ; for the second IV, caseload  $F(2, 448) = .183, p > .05, \eta^2 = .001$ ; nor for the interaction between total years educational experience and caseload  $F(4, 448) = .910, p > .05, \eta^2 = .008$  were significant, and effect sizes were small. Total scores on the CBI were not influenced by caseload, number of years' experience in education, or the combination of the two.

The 3 x 3 x 3 factorial ANOVA conducted to answer the second part of question two examining the influence of three IVs: ethnicity, grade level, and location of school on the CBI totals score demonstrated a significant main effect for the first IV, ethnicity,  $F(2, 448) = 4.241, p < .05, \eta^2 = .020$ . According to the Tukey's post hoc test, professional school counselors who were White ( $M = 45.15, SD = .61$ ) scored



significantly higher ( $p < .001$ ) on the burnout measure than those who were Black ( $M = 38.35$ ,  $SD = 2.07$ ) and significantly higher ( $p < .05$ ) than Hispanic professional school counselors ( $M = 43.58$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ ). However, there was no significant difference between the scores of Black and Hispanic professional school counselors ( $p > .05$ ).

The main effects for the second IV, grade level  $F(2, 448) = 1.030$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .005$ ; for the third IV, location  $F(2, 448) = .639$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .003$ ; for ethnicity and grade level interaction  $F(4, 448) = 1.253$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .012$ ; for ethnicity and location interaction  $F(4, 448) = .666$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .006$ ; for grade level and location interaction  $F(4, 448) = .490$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .005$ ; nor for ethnicity, grade level, and location interaction  $F(7, 448) = .794$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .013$  were significant, and effect sizes were small. Total scores on the CBI were not influenced by grade level of the student with whom the counselor worked, location of school where the counselor worked, or any combination of these variables. However, burnout scores on the CBI were significantly higher for White professional school counselors than for Black or Hispanic professional school counselors.

## Discussion

We will discuss both significant and insignificant results in the context of current literature and relevant contextual issues. Although some may find it unnecessary to discuss insignificant results, we hold that even insignificant findings add to our understanding of the job stress and burnout phenomena among school counselors. Insignificant findings that contradict previous literature should inform future research attempting to identify predictor variables for development of SCBO. Therefore, we will discuss the findings in relationship to existing contradictory literature. We will also

discuss the conclusions we draw from the results of each test conducted for this study, in order to make transparent our understanding of these variables in the context of counselors who develop SCBO.

### **Ethnicity**

Although we were unable to find a study where ethnicity is examined specifically as a precursor to SCBO, we note that a study by Nelson et al. (2008) indicates that Hispanic counselors experienced more role conflict, which is a documented contributing variable to job stress. However, our findings indicated no relationship between ethnicity and job stress. However, the findings indicate a significant positive relationship between ethnicity and burnout with White counselors reporting higher levels of burnout than that of Black or Hispanic counselors. One potential explanation may be that White counselors represented 81% of the sample with Black and Hispanic counselors representing only 10% and 9% respectively, although this is consistent with the population demographic (Lauralea Bauer, personal communication November 2008). As such, the significantly larger number of White counselors in our sample may have resulted in increased sensitivity to slightly higher levels of burnout reported among White counselors. This is a potential limitation of the study. Future research with larger samples of ethnic minority counselors may reveal different results.

### **Number of Years in Education**

Previous research indicated that the number of years' a counselor has worked might be a variable that predicts development of SCBO. However, the findings for research questions one and two contradicted the previous research indicating no relationship between the number of years a counselor spent working in education to the

level of job stress and burnout reported by the professional school counselors surveyed. Differences in sampling may have contributed to the contradictory findings. As noted in the literature review, the Culbreth (2006;  $n = 512$ ) and Butler and Constantine (2005;  $n = 415$ ) samples, although having comparable sample sizes, were both drawn from ASCA membership lists. Our previous study was a small sample of four counselors focused on studying the phenomenology of school counselor burnout (Falls & Nichter, 2007).

In contrast, the current study attempted to gain a broad representative sample of Texas school counselors by sending the survey not through association membership lists but rather by contacting school administrators, district directors of guidance and school counseling, and school counselor educators in Texas, in order to access all school counselors. When designing our study, we chose to survey all school counselors in one state using the state's education department's database of school counselors because we were concerned that using only membership lists from professional organizations may not capture those individuals who were most at risk of developing job stress and burnout. We assumed that those school counselors suffering with issues of job stress and burnout were less likely to be members of professional organizations because of the professional disengagement that occurs when people experience burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001; Golembiewski & Munzenrider, 1988; Hopkins, 2015; Maslach, 1982). Therefore, we chose a sampling strategy that we believed would control for this concern.

### **Grade Level of School**

As discussed, several studies previously indicated that the grade level in which the school counselor worked was potentially predictive of school counselor job stress or burnout (Culbreth et al., 2005; DeMato & Curcio, 2004; Rayle, 2006; Roaten et al., 2008). However, our findings resulting from research questions one and two both contradict this research. We did not find any relationship between the levels of job stress and burnout reported by professional school counselors and the level of the school where they worked (elementary, middle, or high school).

Again, the differences in sampling may have contributed to these contradictory findings between our research and previous literature. Having comparable sample sizes, both Culbreth et al. (2005;  $n = 512$ ) and Rayle (2006;  $n = 388$ ) drew samples from ASCA membership lists, and the Demato and Curcio (2004;  $n = 301$ ) study focused on members of the Virginia School Counselors Association. Our sampling strategy focused on attempting to gain a broad representative sample of professional school counselors in Texas by not using ASCA or TSCA association membership lists to gain participants. This may therefore account for the differences in findings. Future research may add to our understanding by either using a similar sampling strategy on a national level or by replicating our study only with ASCA members.

### **Location of School**

Butler and Constantine (2005) documented higher levels of burnout symptomology among urban school counselors. They attributed this to issues of poverty, social and personal difficulties commonly experienced by urban students, and diversity of cultural backgrounds of students served. However, our findings indicated no

relationship between location of the school (urban, suburban, or rural) and the levels of job stress or burnout reported by the school counselors surveyed. Again, we may attribute the contradictory findings to the fact that we chose not to rely on professional association membership lists, whereas Butler and Constantine (2005) relied solely on the ASCA membership list to gain participants. Although we believe this is a strength of the current study, we also believe that future research exploring the variable with a national sample that does not rely on professional memberships may add to our understanding of this variable as a potential SCBO predictor variable.

### **Size of Caseload**

ASCA indicates caseloads should be 250 or less, ideally, and previous literature suggests higher caseloads are related to development of burnout (Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Paisley & McMahon, 2001). However, our findings indicated no difference between the size of counselor's caseload and the levels of job stress and burnout reported. We reviewed this data to determine if the way we chose to categorize the caseload groups may have contributed to these contradictory findings. We chose the first category based on the ASCA recommendation of 250 students, and only eleven percent of the sample reported having a caseload of the recommended 250 or less students. The third category was chosen based on our experiences as school counselors in Texas, as compared our experiences with other states, where it was not uncommon to have caseloads of 400 or more students, leaving the second category to fill in between the first and third.

Thirty-five percent of the sample reported having caseloads of 251-400, and 53% reported caseloads of over 400 students. We suggest that the probable reason for

finding no relationship between size of caseload and levels of job stress and burnout is that the vast majority of Texas professional school counselors surveyed (88%) reported caseloads over the ASCA recommended 250 students. Therefore, there may be a relationship between caseload and levels of job stress and burnout among other populations of school counselors, but Texas school counselors may be more likely to have caseloads that are larger than recommended. This may result in higher levels of job stress and burnout across the population of professional school counselors in Texas, as compared to those in other states. This is a potential limitation of this study as it relates to generalizability to other groups of school counselors. Future research should further explore this variable with a more diverse group of participants, in order to further evaluate its usefulness as a SCBO predictor variable.

### **Implications**

We chose the variables explored in this study from the limited previous research on school counselor job satisfaction, job stress, and burnout. Although there may be additional variables such as sexual orientation or gender identity that impact development of SCBO, these were not evident in existing literature. As a result, we chose to delimit our study only to include those variables that were previously suggested as potential contributing variables to SCBO. This is a potential limitation of the study. Therefore, further exploration of SCBO among ethnic and gender minorities may provide a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon among diverse groups of people who may otherwise not be adequately represented by the literature.

There are differences between our sampling strategy and that of previous studies, which we discuss above, that may explain why the results in our study indicated

no relationships between some of the variables (number of years in education, grade level of school, and location of school), and job stress or burnout when previous studies suggested these were potential contributing variables. We recommend future studies examine these variables with larger national samples that are gathered from state education departments' databases of all working school counselors, rather than relying exclusively upon professional organizations' membership databases.

Our study was delimited to survey only school counselors in Texas. This is a potential limitation for generalizing our findings to the larger population of school counselors. Therefore, we recommend that future research is conducted evaluating the effect of caseload size on levels of job stress and burnout. Several recent studies indicate that size of caseload contributes to burnout among school counselors (Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Gnilka, Karpinski, & Smith, 2015; Gunduz, 2012). The differences may be related to geographic differences or differences in state approaches to regulating caseloads, which would not be adequately evaluated with a sample solely consisting of counselors from one state, even a large and diverse one like Texas. For this reason, we suggest school counselors with high caseloads, along with White counselors who exhibited higher levels of SCBO, should be closely monitored for increased levels of job stress using the DCSQ and provided early intervention when indicated. Finally, we would suggest that the demographic variables hypothesized to impact levels of stress or burnout experienced by school counselors may not be significant enough to warrant including these in predictive models of school counselor job stress or burnout.

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