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Exploring the Career Satisfaction of Counselor Educators

Regina R. Moro
Boise State University

Rebecca Scherer
University of Nevada Reno

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Abstract

In this article, the authors report counselor educators' career satisfaction through a descriptive analysis. Seventy-five counselor educators from all across the United States completed an online demographic questionnaire and four self-report instruments related to career satisfaction in general, work environment, and mentorship experiences. The results indicate that counselor educators report satisfaction with most aspects of the job, but report dissatisfaction with pay/promotion and mentorship. This is important for consideration for current and future counselor educators, due to the amount of time and cost associated with obtaining a doctoral degree. The researchers discuss and suggest future research recommendations.

Keywords

Counselor educators, career satisfaction, work environment, higher education, mentorship

Due to the influential role of educators, particularly those in higher education, understanding the career satisfaction of university professors is an important area of inquiry. There are approximately 1.3 million postsecondary instructors in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). This number includes all educators beyond high school levels (e.g., career and technical instructors, community college instructors, and private and public college and university professors). For college and university positions, a graduate level degree is most often required (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Graduate degrees represent a significant investment (i.e., time, money) for the individual pursuing the degree. Before making this investment, it is realistic to assume a potential counselor educator might consider her or his future job satisfaction level, and look to those currently serving in those positions as models.

Counselor educators have particularly influential roles given their widespread reach (i.e., colleagues, students, and clients). With this influence, they have a large responsibility for mentoring new faculty members, future faculty members, current doctoral students, and masters' students (Wester, Trepal, & Myers, 2009). This responsibility is echoed in the American Counseling Association (2014) Code of Ethics as counselor educators have an ethical responsibility to "serve as role models for professional behavior" (p. 14). Hill (2004) discussed the isomorphic relationship between educator-student and student-client, and the ultimate influence educators have on clients. Parr and colleagues (1996) further highlight the influence counselor educators have on students, particularly those in doctoral programs who may consider careers in academia.

Mentoring relationships have implications for job satisfaction. Xu and Payne (2014) explored faculty members' experiences with mentoring, specifically looking at the quality of mentoring, satisfaction with mentoring, job satisfaction, and faculty members' intents to leave.

These authors found that satisfaction with mentoring mediated the relationship between quality of mentoring and outcome variables (i.e., job satisfaction and intent to leave one's position), highlighting the role of quality, not the sole existence of a mentor. Schrod, Cawyer, and Sanders (2003) highlight how mentoring experiences are able to help faculty members socialize into the work environment, and how they also provide key information related to promotion and tenure expectations. Within counselor education, there has been limited empirical research exploring mentoring, although there has been attention provided to detailing best practices (Borders et al., 2011) and overviews of suggested mentoring frameworks (Hammer, Trepal, & Speedlin, 2014; Solomon & Barden, 2016). Each of these articles provides useful information particularly for those that are expected to serve in a mentor role.

In addition to the importance of understanding job satisfaction for role modeling and mentoring junior professionals, August and Waltman (2004) discuss the influence that satisfaction has as a contributing factor for an individual's intent to leave the academic setting. This has implications for individuals who may then be in need of an alternative career plan, as well as for institutions as employers. Employers attempt to recruiting and retaining high quality employees and need to consider how job satisfaction can influence a candidate's likelihood to accept an offer (Bozeman & Gaughan, 2011).

Job satisfaction has been explored in the general counseling profession (Gambrell, Rehfuss, Suarez, & Meyer, 2011), and in the specific area of counselor education (Alexander-Albritton & Hill, 2015; Parr, Bradley, Lan, & Gould, 1996). In general, Gambrell et al. (2011) report that counselors are satisfied with their careers, regardless of education or specialty area. A major difference Gambrell and colleagues observed was related to satisfaction with promotion opportunities; the authors report that doctoral-level counselors and those specializing in

counselor education, reported higher satisfaction in this domain. Considering the promotion and tenure process integrated into the academic setting (Gambrell et al., 2011), this is an understandable finding in differences.

Parr, Bradley, Lan, and Gould (1996) examined the career satisfaction of members of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES). A little less than half of Parr et al.'s (1996) sample ($n= 78$; 46.7%) identified as counselor educators. These authors did not disaggregate the results according to the professional roles of members, yet they found that the majority of respondent indicated they were either quite satisfied ($n= 75$; 44.9%) or very satisfied ($n= 60$, 35.9%) with their careers (Parr et al., 1996). Differences between female and male work experiences have increased specific attention to career experiences of female counselor educators (Hill, 2009; Shillingford, Trice-Black, & Butler, 2013). Alexander-Albritton and Hill (2015) examined female counselor educators' satisfaction in their jobs, and factors related to satisfaction. Findings indicated that participants' reported moderate job satisfaction, specifically related to intrinsic rewards associated with one's job, although this fluctuated by rank.

A concept heavily related to job satisfaction is wellness, an area that has received considerable attention in the counseling literature (Lawson & Myers, 2011; Myers, Mobley, & Booth, 2003; Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000; Puig et al., 2012; Witmer & Young, 1996). In addition, wellness has been studied within the specialty area of counselor education (Hill, 2004; Myers, Trepal, Ivers, & Wester, 2016; Shillingford et al., 2013; Wester, Trepal, & Myers, 2009). In general, counselor educators appear to report overall well being (Wester et al., 2009), although they may experience burnout and stress (Hill, 2009; Moate, Gnilka, West, & Bruns, 2016). Sangganjanacanich and Balkin (2013) found a significant relationship between burnout and job satisfaction of counselor educators. Hill (2009) explored occupational satisfaction of counselor

educators with findings highlighting the role of stress in pre-tenured faculty experiences. Hill operationalized occupational satisfaction using an occupational stress scale, and recommended further investigations using a more “global assessment of occupational satisfaction” (p. 59).

Purpose

The purpose of this current study was to gain an understanding of the career experiences of current counselor educators at the national level. Given that faculty members spend large portion of their lives in work related duties (Sabharwal & Corley, 2009), that they serve as role models for junior professionals (ACA, 2014; Hill, 2009; Wester et al., 2009), and that satisfaction with one’s job has important connections to overall health (Alexander-Albritton & Hill, 2015; Connolly & Myers, 2003), we believe this is a deserving area of focus.

The following research questions were examined in the study: How do counselor educators report overall satisfaction with their jobs? How do counselor educators report satisfaction with different facets (i.e., work itself, pay, promotion, supervision, and coworkers) of their job situation? How do counselor educators experience their work environment as measured by relationship dimensions, personal growth or goal oriented dimensions, and system maintenance/change dimensions? How do counselor educators describe their satisfaction with mentoring experiences?

Method

Participants

Upon obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researchers used an electronic online platform to distribute the research survey to counselor educators across the United States. We compiled a list counselor education programs from CACREP and emailed the faculty from the counseling departments directly asking for participation. A research request was

also posted on CESNET-L, a listserv maintained for professional counselors and counselor educators. One hundred and eight counselor educators responded. Thirty-three cases were eliminated for not completing the survey completely; therefore, 75 responses were used for descriptive analysis.

Counselor educators ($N = 75$) completed an online questionnaire from all over the United States, including Washington D.C. Forty-six participants (61.3%) reported at the assistant professor level, 11 (14.7%) at the associate level, 4 (5.3%) full professorship, 7 (9.3%) adjunct, and 7 (9.3%) instructors. Over half of the participants, 65.3%, were working in a tenure-track line. Eighteen (24%) were working for less than one year, 28 (37.3%) 1-3 years, 14 (18.7%) 4-6 years, 7 (9.3%) 7-10 years, 6 (8%) 11-20 years, and 2 (2.7%) working 20 years plus. The participant characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 *Participant Data*

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage
Highest Degree Earned	EdD	6	8
	EdS	1	1.3
	MA	3	4
	MS	3	4
	PhD	62	82.7
Field of Highest Degree	Clinical Psychology	2	2.7
	Counseling	14	18.7
	Counseling Psychology	5	6.7
	Counselor Education and Supervision	51	68
	Rehabilitation Counseling	2	2.7
	Social Work	1	1.3
	Employment Status	Full-Time Counselor Educator	65
	Part-Time Counselor Educator	10	13.3
Track	Clinical	14	18.7
	Tenure	12	16
	Not Applicable	12	16
Work Environment	APA Accredited PhD	1	1.3
	CACREP MA and PhD	30	40
	CACREP MA/PhD; APA PhD	1	1.3
	CACREP MA	28	37.3
	No Accreditation	11	14.6
	Seeking accreditation	4	5.3
	Carnegie Classification	M1	8
M2		5	6.7
M3		7	9.3
R1		11	14.7
R2		15	20
R3		11	14.7
Unknown		18	24

Note. $N = 75$. EdD = Doctor of Education, EdS = Specialist in Education, MA = Master of Arts, MS = Master of Science, PhD = Doctor of Philosophy. M1 = Master's Colleges and Universities, larger programs; M2 = Master's Colleges and Universities, medium programs, M3 = Master's

Colleges and Universities, smaller programs; R1 = Doctoral Universities, highest research activity, R2 = Doctoral Universities, higher research activities, R3 = Doctoral Universities, moderate research activity.

The respondent's ages ranged from 28 – 72 years. Fifty-eight (77.3%) identified as female, 16 (21.3%) male, and 1 (1.3%) non-binary. The ethnicity of the sample was: 46 (61.3%) Caucasian, 8 (10.6%) African American, 6 (8%) Hispanic/Latinx, 3 (4%) Asian American, 1 (1.3%) Asian Pacific Islander, 5 (6.6%) Biracial, 2 (2.6%) Multiracial, and 2 (2.6%) did not indicate.

Instrumentation

We used four instruments in this research to measure three variables of interest and one demographic questionnaire, with results covered above. The three variables of interest were measured by the Job Descriptive Index (Brodke et al., 2009), the Work Environment Scale (Moos & Insel, 1974), and the Satisfaction with Mentoring scale (Xu & Payne, 2014). These three scales were chosen due to the strong psychometric properties as well as previous use in research. In addition, we used a demographic questionnaire to understand the results in the context of the identities of the participants.

Job descriptive index. The Job Descriptive Index (JDI) is self-report measure of job satisfaction (Brodke et al., 2009). The scale consists of 90 items where participants can endorse how much a word or phrase describes parts of their jobs by marking “yes,” “no,” or “cannot decide.” Participants respond to phrases that describe people on their present job, job in general, work on present job, pay, opportunities for promotion, and supervision. Total scores were used to define how the sample felt about the subscales of the JDI. Cronbach's coefficient alpha for this sample was .956, indicating a high level of reliability among the items (Brodke et al., 2009).

Work environment scale. The Work Environment Scale-Real Form (WES) is a self-report measure of employees' current perceptions of work environment (Moos & Insel, 1974). The scale consists of 90 statements where participants were asked to choose whether the statement is true or false of the work environment. The three overarching subscales of the WES are relationship dimensions, personal growth dimensions, and system maintenance and change dimensions. The involvement, coworker cohesion, and supervisor support subscales make up the relationship dimensions of the WES; the autonomy, task orientation, and work pressure subscales make up the personal growth dimensions of the WES; and the clarity, managerial control, innovation, and physical comfort subscales make up the system maintenance and change dimensions of the WES. Test-retest reliability is as follows: involvement, .83; coworker cohesion, .71; supervisor support, .82; autonomy, .77; task orientation, .73; work pressure, .76; clarity, .69; managerial control, .79; innovation, .74; and physical comfort, .78. An answer key is used to assign points to the participants' answers for the WES. Scores can then be compared to the scores of work groups in general to describe the results of the WES (Moos, 2008).

Satisfaction with mentoring. For the satisfaction with mentoring variable, the researchers used two instruments: the Mentorship Quality Scale-Modified and the Satisfaction with Mentoring Measure from Xu and Payne (2014)'s research. Both scales are three-item questionnaires rated on 5-point agreement scale, 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the sample were .933, indicating a high level of reliability among the items.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to answer the four research questions in the analysis. According to Johnson and Christensen (2008), descriptive statistics are appropriate to use when

attempting to understand a set of data; in the current study, the data consists of responses to the questionnaires, completed by a convenience sample of counselor educators. In addition, Mills and Gay (2016) report using descriptive statistics as appropriate to use when attempting to understand general information. The researchers chose to use descriptive statistics to describe how counselor educators perceive their job in general, work environment, and mentorship experiences.

Results

Research Question 1

The Job in General (JIG) scale of the Job Descriptive Index (JDI; Brodke et al., 2009) was used to measure overall satisfaction. Of a possible 54 points, counselor educators report a $M = 44.5$ points, $SD = 12.8$, indicating a high satisfaction with their jobs. The most frequent point quantity was 54 points, representing 38.9% of participants that endorsed total satisfaction with his or her job. The range of responses was from 0-54 points.

Research Question 2

The mean scores of a possible 54 points of counselor educators' work itself, pay, promotion, supervision, and coworkers are: work itself, $M = 46.1$, $SD = 11.6$; pay, $M = 27.5$, $SD = 19.3$; promotion, $M = 25.1$, $SD = 18.6$; supervision, $M = 41.1$, $SD = 14.6$; and coworkers, $M = 41.2$, $SD = 14.4$. Counselor educators are most satisfied with the work itself, closely followed by supervision and coworkers. Counselor educators are least satisfied with the pay and promotion aspects of the job.

Research Question 3

The first three subscales (Involvement, Peer Cohesion, and Supervisor Support) of the Work Environment Scale (WES; Moos & Insel, 1974) are the Relationships Dimensions. The

Involvement (I) subscale measures employees concern and commitment to their jobs. Peer Cohesion (PC) subscale measures employee friendliness and supportiveness. The Supervisor Support (SS) subscale measures employee perception of supervisor support. Counselor educators rate themselves average ($M = 6, SD = 2.7$) on the I subscale, well below average ($M = 4.3, SD = 2.8$) on the PC subscale, and between below average and average ($M = 5.2, SD = 2.4$) on the SS subscale.

The personal growth or goal orientation dimension of the WES is composed of the Autonomy, Task Orientation, and Work Pressure subscales (Moos & Insel, 1974). Autonomy (A) subscale measures the extent to which employees are encouraged to be self-sufficient and independently motivated. The Task Orientation (TO) subscale measures the emphasis on planning and efficient work strategies of the employee, and the Work Pressure (WP) subscale measures the perceived pressure of the job to get work done. Counselor educators report above average ($M = 6.4, SD = 2.2$) A, average ($M = 5.7, SD = 2.4$) TO, and well above average ($M = 6.1, SD = 2.6$) WP.

The system maintenance and system change dimension is measured by the Clarity, Control, Innovation, and Physical Comfort subscales of the WES (Moos & Insel, 1974). The Clarity (C) subscale measures the extent to which employees are clear about expectations and daily routines of the job. The Control (Ctl) subscale measures the extent which management and supervisors use rules and pressure to keep employees in line. The Innovation (Inn) subscale measures the degree of which variety, changes, and new approaches are appreciated in the work environment. The Physical Comfort (Com) measures the extent to which the physical environment contributes to the pleasantness experienced by the employee. Counselor educators report well below average ($M = 4.2, SD = 2$) C, below average ($M = 3.6, SD = 2$) Ctl, average

($M = 4.3$, $SD = 3$) Inn, and average ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 2.5$) Com. nd 4.5-5 Com (Moos & Insel, 1974).

Research Question 4

The Mentorship Quality Scale-Modified (Xu & Payne, 2014) and the Satisfaction of Mentoring Scale (Xu & Payne, 2014) are three item instruments used to assess satisfaction with mentoring experiences rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. Counselor educators disagree with benefitting from their mentorship relationship ($M = 2.2$, $SD = 1.2$). Counselor educators also disagree with effectively using mentoring ($M = 2.3$, $SD = 1.2$), and they disagree that they have had high quality mentoring relationships ($M = 2.2$, $SD = 1.4$). Counselor educators also disagree about being satisfied with mentoring ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 1.3$), and are close to neutral about disappointment with mentoring and mentoring meeting their needs, $M = 2.8$, $SD = 1.4$ and $M = 2.7$, $SD = 1.4$, respectively.

Discussion

In this study, descriptive analytic techniques were used to explore counselor educators' career experiences in relation to overall job satisfaction, the work environment, and mentorship experiences. The results indicate that in general, counselor educators report high satisfaction with their careers, but certain aspects of the job are experienced less satisfactorily, such as pay and promotion opportunities. Interestingly, counselor educators in this study were either completely satisfied, or not at all satisfied in regards to pay. Examining the differences in pay may shed light onto what predicts satisfaction in this domain. August and Waltman (2004) explored perceptions regarding pay equity and differences among tenured and non-tenured faculty members and found support for pay equity as an issue for tenured professors, but not those pre-tenure, which is in contrast to the current study findings. Although analysis was not conducted to explore the impact

that tenure status has on perceptions of pay equity, the majority of participants in the current study identified as tenure-track assistant professors, yet there was indication that there was below average satisfaction with their pay. August and Waltman hypothesized that perhaps pre-tenured faculty members are more likely to just be happy to have employment, and those that have achieved tenure may have had more time to consider the pay inequality present on his or her campus. Counselor educators may however question the pay in academia in comparison to clinical positions they may be able to gain out in the field. Although, as counselors, we often discuss the notion that this is not a highly lucrative field, the reality of student loan debt concerning our newer graduates may be a factor for them to consider pursuing careers in academia.

The other environmental aspect counselor educators' in this study reported below average satisfaction with is promotion opportunities. Gambrell et al.'s (2011) findings suggested that participants in their study who specialized in counselor education indicated a higher satisfaction with promotion opportunities. Due to the integrated process of promotion and tenure within academia (Gambrell et al., 2011), it may be that counselor educators do have more awareness of opportunities for promotion, however these are limited in nature. Perhaps the lower satisfaction with promotion opportunities is in light of the rigorous nature of attaining tenure, particularly in higher up research institutions. The current study did find counselor educators' reported an increase in work pressure, and the majority of participants were tenure-track assistant professors. Pre-tenured faculty members may feel an increased pressure and perhaps are concerned about whether they will or will not attain tenure, consistent with Hill's (2009) findings about stress amongst pre-tenured faculty members. In addition, for those that do attain tenure, the promotion opportunities following that may be deemed less than desirable. There is the next promotion to

full professor, however for those that are not interested in pursuing administrative positions, that promotion may be the final possibility, beyond emeritus status in retirement.

The exploration of mentoring experiences among counselor educators highlighted a lack of overall satisfaction. There was a reported lack of benefit seen in mentoring, and a lack of perceived high quality mentoring. However, the results also suggest a lack of effective use of mentoring. Perhaps the mentee is not utilizing a mentor relationship, or does not know how to use a mentor relationship, to gain the benefits recognized in previous literature.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the interesting findings of the current study, these should be interpreted with caution due to the associated limitations with the current research. The use of convenience sampling technique and the small sample size limit the generalizability of the findings (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The small sample size is not surprising in relation to other studies of counselor educators (Parr et al., 1996; Gambrell et al., 2011), yet it is unknown as to what causes the lack of response from counselor educators. For example, Wester, Trepal, and Myers (2009) reported a 12% response rate for their study of wellness amongst counselor educators. Perhaps lack of response is due to the increased work pressure, and lack of time. The use of surveys is common in the job satisfaction literature (Bozeman & Gaughan, 2011), but it would behoove the profession to consider alternative ways to gain this information.

In addition, it is important that future research utilize more advanced statistical analyses. The current study used descriptive statistics as these were appropriate given the questions under study, but to gain more insight into relationships between variables, as well as predictor variables, regression analyses or structural equation modeling could be used. For example, an advanced path analysis examining the mediating role of marginalized identities on career satisfaction

would be an important area of inquiry, particularly given the importance of recruiting and retaining faculty of marginalized identities (e.g., race, gender, religion, sexual orientation) (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016). In addition, future research could explore whether the career satisfaction of faculty member influence the likelihood that doctoral students pursue careers in academia.

The present study explored the career experiences of counselor educators. Descriptive statistics were used to explore overall career satisfaction, factors related to satisfaction, and mentorship satisfaction. The results highlight specific areas of career that participants found satisfaction in, such as the work itself and coworker relationships, while indicating lower satisfaction with financial components of the job. The results exploring mentoring relationships were less than encouraging, and suggest future research explore this area. Implications were addressed, and just as Parr et al. (1996) we encourage more research in this important area of inquiry, particularly focusing on how faculty members' satisfaction levels may have direct or indirect influence on students' career trajectories.

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