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Burnout in Counselor Education: The Role of Cynicism and Fit in Predicting Turnover Intention

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Abstract

This study explored the experience of burnout in counselor education faculty, and how it relates to perceived worklife fit and turnover intention. Participants experienced a moderate level of burnout in the areas of exhaustion, cynicism, and professional inefficacy. The results of a MANOVA revealed that male and female participants differed on a composite measure of burnout, fit, and turnover intention, but there were no significant multivariate differences based on race or tenure status. Both cynicism and perceived worklife fit uniquely contributed to the prediction of turnover intention, together explaining 29% of the total variance in turnover intention. Further directions for research in this population were discussed.

Keywords

burnout, counselor education, turnover intention

Author's Notes

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Burnout in Counselor Education: The Role of Cynicism and Fit in Predicting Turnover Intention

Academia is a unique environment characterized by both high levels of autonomy (Hamilton, 2007) and heavy workloads (Blix, Cruise, Mitchell, & Blix, 1994; Townsend & Rosser, 2007). While many faculty report profound satisfaction from their work, faculty also report role strain, insufficient mentoring, toxic relationships in the workplace, and increased levels of stress (Blix et al., 1994; Court & Kinman, 2008; Hill, Leinbaugh, Brandley, & Hazler, 2005). Just as it is a professional challenge to counselors working in the field (Lambie, 2007; Lawson, 2007; Sprang, Clark, & Whitt-Woosley, 2007), burnout is a significant problem for those who work in academia (Lackritz, 2004; Singh, Mishra, & Kim, 1998). Burnout can be characterized by three components: exhaustion, depersonalization and/or cynicism, as well as reduced personal and/or professional efficacy (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). The phenomenon can manifest in a variety of ways, such as low mood or irritability, forgetfulness, gastrointestinal complaints, heightened arousal, increased substance use, as well as a sense of disillusionment regarding the job (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Counselor education programs are grounded in wellness and emphasize the importance of self-care to buffer the stresses of the work (Yager & Tovar-Blank, 2007). Counselor educators who model wellness and self-care are more likely to produce counselors who are more attuned to their own wellness needs and can better attend to those needs in their clients (Hill, 2004).

Factors contributing to dissatisfaction and organizational turnover in higher education include dissatisfaction with salary and/or perceived unfairness in pay, experiences of inequity, low job security, poor relationships with peers and/or administration, low quality of life standards, and excessive time demands (Barnes, Agago, & Coombs, 1998; Conklin & Desselle, 2007; Heckert & Farabee, 2006; Johnsrud & Heck, 1994; Lindholm, 2003). Faculty in the

university setting can be vulnerable to workplace stress or dissatisfaction due to demographic factors, such as minority status or being untenured (Sabharwall & Corley, 2009; Zhou & Volkwein, 2004); personality characteristics, such as type-A behavior (Bilge, 2006; Otero López, Marino, & Bolano, 2008); or organizational factors, such as salary dissatisfaction or lack of a sense of community (Barnes et al., 1998; Bozeman & Gaughan, 2011). These factors can influence faculty members' perception of their fit in the workplace. When workers feel as though they do not fit in their workplace, the likelihood for burnout or turnover increases (Lackritz, 2004; Lindholm, 2003; Rosser, 2004). Research within counselor education mirrors these results (Hill, 2009; Hill, 2004; Leinbaugh, Hazler, Bradley, & Hill, 2003). Burnout in faculty teaching in counselor education programs can endanger the health of a program and can potentially compromise the quality of the education provided. Therefore, understanding the extent to which counselor educators report symptoms of burnout can assist in identification of the factors that contribute to it in this population.

Burnout in Higher Education

There are many work opportunities available to someone with a doctoral degree in counselor education, including higher education; however, faculty positions can be quite competitive (Bodenhorn et al., 2014). When an individual accepts a position, a mutual agreement, or psychological contract, is formed between the employee and the employer, which can be both written and unwritten (Rousseau, 1989). If this contract is violated, a type of reality shock may set in. Rice, Sorcinelli, and Austin (2000) found that “what early-career faculty *hoped for* and *need* from their work life do not fully match what they actually experience over time” (p. 6, italics in original). In such situations, satisfaction and trust decrease, and cynicism can occur, resulting in increased rates of turnover (Andersson, 1998; Robinson & Rousseau,

1994). Doctoral graduates devote years to preparing and training for their career, and universities make a significant investment recruiting and interviewing candidates for these competitive positions. Faculty applicants evaluate many factors in making a decision on accepting an appointment in a university. Considerations of person-environment fit are crucial because workplace satisfaction is linked with employees perceiving a good fit between the workplace and themselves (Castiglia, 2006; Olsen, Maple, & Stage, 1995). As ensuring a healthy fit is critical to the well-being of both the faculty member and the university, faculty should seek “an environment that best fits personal values and professional needs” (Xu, 2008, p. 59). However, changes in an organization can weaken the fit that first drew a faculty member to a position. Burnout can occur when there are mismatches in one or more of the six areas of worklife: community, control, fairness, reward, values, and workload (Leiter & Maslach, 2005). Universities lose out financially when faculty leave their positions. High start-up costs, time lost by search committee members and costs associated with the search process, and loss of talent are among the consequences for universities when faculty members leave (Williams & Norton, 2008).

Burnout in Counselor Education

Much research has been done exploring the causes and consequences of burnout; however, few studies have examined burnout in higher education and none has investigated the relationship among burnout, turnover intention, and person-environment fit among counselor education faculty. Little is known about burnout specifically in counselor education; one dissertation study focused on burnout in counselor educators (Bartley, 2005) and another examined work and life factors that contributed the quality of counselor educators' work experiences (McCortney, 2005). Bartley (2005) sought to determine whether counselor

educators experience burnout and what internal and external factors were correlated with burnout. In this sample, burnout was low and there was a negative correlation between emotional intelligence and burnout. Further, there was a significant relationship between burnout and age and academic rank, with faculty between the ages of 31 and 40 years and those who identified as assistant professors as experiencing higher scores of burnout. McCortney (2005) explored faculty experiences of male and female faculty from both programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and non-CACREP-accredited programs. Pertinent results indicated that male and female counselor educators perceive the work environment differently and pretenured faculty had few positive experiences in the work environment. In a more recent study, Sangganjanavanich and Balkin (2013) examined burnout and job satisfaction in counselor educators, finding emotional exhaustion to be a predictor for a decrease in job satisfaction.

The counseling profession emphasizes the relationship between people as the foundation of a counselor's effectiveness (Lambie, 2006), and this dynamic is mirrored in the relationship between faculty and students. Yager and Tovar-Blank (2007) asserted that "If one's mentors are burned out, slowed by sleeplessness, stressed by a spiritual disconnect, or burdened by physical inactivity, it is not positive self-care that will be communicated" (p. 145). Counselor educators emphasize self-awareness, personal growth, and wellness to their graduate students, but modeling these concepts is also essential (Yager & Tovar-Blank, 2007). In response to limited research on burnout among counselor educators, the purpose of this exploratory study was to evaluate the relationships among demographic variables (gender, race/ethnicity, and tenure status), burnout, turnover intention, and worklife fit in a sample of counselor educators.

Method

Participants

Complete survey data were provided by 64 full-time counselor educators from programs listed in the 2012 directory of CACREP-accredited programs, constituting an approximately 8% response rate. Thirty (47%) of the participants identified as male, and thirty-four (53%) identified as female. The majority (80%) of the participants were Caucasian, 11% were African American, and approximately 9% identified as another race or combination of races. The average age of the participants was approximately 49 years old ($sd = 10.38$), with ages ranging from 30 to 68 years old. Seventy-seven percent ($n = 49$) reported having a Ph.D. or Ed.D. degree in counselor education and supervision. In this sample, all participants were tenure-track faculty, with 66% ($n = 42$) already having attained tenure. Participants reported an average of 12 years ($sd = 9.07$) working in counselor education and averaged 10 years ($sd = 8.02$) in their current positions.

Procedure

Approval was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to conducting research. Counselor education faculty from CACREP-accredited programs were identified across the United States using the CACREP website listings for accredited programs. There were 264 universities with CACREP-accreditation as of December 2011. Three Midwestern counselor education programs were excluded due to conflicts of interest with the researchers. Following identification, contact information was obtained using university website listings for all full-time core faculty members. Program websites that did not list program faculty or those with missing or inaccurate contact information for faculty members were excluded. Finally, a random number generator (Haahr, 2012) was used to randomly select participants to receive an electronic survey link. As the selection process was truly random,

some participants were likely be chosen more than once; therefore, a sampling of 400 potential participants was requested. The random number generator produced 358 unique names; however, eight participants had inaccurate contact information and were excluded. The remaining 350 participants were personally contacted by email and sent an electronic survey study link approximately one month into the spring 2012 semester. Participants who did not respond to the initial email received a follow-up email ten days later, and a final reminder seven days after that. The invitational email contained an electronic link to the online survey, which consisted of a demographic form and the Maslach Burnout Inventory - General Survey (MBI-GS), to be discussed below.

Early in data collection, it became clear that more participants were necessary to attempt to reach adequate power in statistical analyses. After receiving permission from the IRB to sample additional participants, 500 additional participants were identified using the sample selection procedure previously (excluding participants already identified or with inaccurate contact information). Altogether, a total of 850 participants were invited to participate in the study.

Measures

Demographic form. The demographic form assessed participants' age, race/ethnicity, gender, highest level of education, tenure status, number of years as a counselor education faculty member in the current position, and number of years in counselor education total. The demographic form also included items to measure turnover intention using three questions modified from Leiter and Maslach's (2009) adaptation of a turnover intention measure (Kelloway, Gottlieb, & Barham, 1999). Fit within the work environment was initially assessed

using six Likert-type format questions designed to reflect the content of each one of Leiter and Maslach's (2005) six dimensions of worklife.

MBI-GS. There are three Maslach Burnout Inventory instruments: the Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS), the Educators Survey (MBI-ES), and the General Survey (MBI-GS; Maslach et al., 1996). The MBI- HSS and MBI-ES focus solely on the service relationship (e.g., working with clients or teaching students), whereas the MBI-GS focuses more generally on the performance of work. In most tenure-track positions in higher education, teaching is only one component of the position, with scholarship and service essential elements of the job expectation (Price & Cotton, 2006). Therefore, rather than focusing exclusively on student relationships as the possible source of burnout, "the MBI-GS defines burnout as a crisis in one's relationship with work, not necessarily as a crisis in one's relationship with people at work" (Maslach et al., 1996, p. 20). The MBI-GS seemed more appropriate to assess faculty burnout.

The MBI-GS is a 16-question instrument measuring the three dimensions of burnout: exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach et al., 1996). Exhaustion is measured by five questions, cynicism is measured by five questions, and inefficacy is measured by six questions, with no crossover between subscales (Maslach et al., 1996). Participants respond by indicating how often they feel a certain way on a zero-to-six-point Likert scale, with zero meaning "Never" and six meaning "Every Day." The subscale scores cannot be combined into one global burnout score (Maslach, Leiter, & Schaufeli, 2008); therefore, the MBI-GS provides three subscale scores that can be correlated with other variables. Using respondents from North America, Holland, and Finland, C. Wright (2005) found solid internal consistency reliability using Cronbach's alpha and reported a similar patterns of scores for exhaustion (.89, .87, and .87, respectively); cynicism (.80, .73, and .84, respectively), and professional efficacy

(.76, .77, and .84, respectively). Bakker, Demerouti, and Schaufeli (2002) examined the factorial validity for this three factor model and found this factor structure superior to either a two- or one-factor model.

Results

The participants' scores on the MBI-GS, the perceived worklife fit composite, and the index of turnover intention are presented in Table 1, organized by participant gender. Conducting separate statistical analyses on each of six worklife questions was not feasible because of the small sample size (and the corresponding increase in the Type I error rate). As an alternative strategy, Tabachnick and Fidell (2001) recommended that combining correlated independent variables into a composite index could increase statistical power in studies with smaller than expected sample sizes. Consequently, participants' responses to the six worklife match dimensions were summed into a combined total representing worklife match and an average was taken. This composite index had an internal consistency (α) of .86, and item-total scale correlations that ranged from .53 to .80 ($Mdn r = .64$). Overall, perceived worklife fit for the sample was rated between *tolerable* and *satisfactory* ($m = 3.54$). Turnover intention was low in the sample, with very few faculty members indicating that they were intending to leave their positions ($m = 1.80, sd = .96$), indicating they were not planning to leave, were not seeking other positions, and committed to remaining in their current position.

Table 1

Mean Scores of the Major Study Variables by Gender

	Total Sample ($N = 64$)		Females ($n = 34$)		Males ($n = 30$)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Variable</i>						

Burnout						
Exhaustion	2.29	1.33	2.38	1.35	2.20	1.32
Cynicism	1.72	1.31	1.49	1.24	1.97	1.37
Professional Efficacy	4.97	.73	5.07	.75	4.86	.70
Turnover	1.80	.96	1.67	.93	1.94	.99
Perceived Worklife Fit	21.25	4.82	21.18	4.98	21.33	4.71

A 2 x 2 x 2 multivariate analysis of variance was performed to evaluate whether the scores on exhaustion, cynicism, professional efficacy, turnover intention, and perceived worklife fit varied as a function of gender (male or female), race (majority or minority), and tenure status (pre-tenured or tenured). Based on the Wilks' criterion, there was a statistically significant multivariate difference associated with gender [$F(5, 52) = 2.76, p = .03, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .21$], but not for race [$F(5, 52) = 1.45, p = .22, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .12$] or tenure status [$F(5, 52) = 1.32, p = .27, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .11$]. There were no significant interaction effects between race and gender [$F(5, 52) = .91, p = .48, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .08$], race and tenure status [$F(5, 52) = .39, p = .86, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .04$], gender and tenure status [$F(5, 52) = 1.56, p = .19, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .13$], or race, gender, and tenure status [$F(5, 52) = 1.01, p = .42, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .09$].

In response to the significant association found between gender and the composite of the dependent variables, a series of ANOVAs were conducted to compare male and female respondents on the five dependent variables. None of these follow-up comparisons reached statistical significance: exhaustion [$F(1, 62) = .28, p = .60, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .00$], cynicism [$F(1, 62) = 2.11, p = .15, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .03$], professional efficacy [$F(1, 62) = 1.31, p = .26, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .02$], turnover intention [$F(1, 62) = 1.34, p = .25, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .02$], and perceived worklife fit [$F(1, 62)$

= .02, $p = .90$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$]. Consequently, although there was a main effect for gender in the MANOVA, no significant univariate effects were subsequently found.

Correlational analyses were also conducted to examine the relationships among the five dependent variables. Table 2 presents the correlations among burnout (exhaustion, cynicism, professional efficacy), turnover intention, and perceived worklife fit. Exhaustion and cynicism had a strong significant positive correlation and both subscales had a significant negative correlation with feelings of professional efficacy. Similarly, exhaustion and cynicism both had significant positive correlations with turnover, and both had significant negative correlations with perceived worklife fit.

Table 2

Correlational Table of the Major Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Exhaustion	-	.71**	-.27*	.36**	-.35**
2. Cynicism		-	-.40**	.48**	-.51**
3. Professional Efficacy			-	-.18	.20
4. Turnover					-.45**
5. Perceived Worklife Fit					-

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

In addition to these bivariate analyses, a regression analysis (forced-entry) was conducted to evaluate how well the three burnout subscales predicted turnover intention. As a group, the

three burnout scales explained 23% of the variance in turnover intention [$F(3, 60) = 6.06, p < .01$]. However, only cynicism ($\beta = .47, t = 2.78, sr^2 = .10, p < .01$) emerged as a significant predictor of turnover intention; scores on exhaustion ($\beta = .03, t = .17, sr^2 = .00, p = .86$) and professional efficacy ($\beta = .01, t = .10, sr^2 = .00, p = .92$) were not significant predictors of turnover intention.

An additional regression analysis (forced-entry) was conducted to determine how well the burnout subscales predicted perceived worklife fit. Combined together, the three burnout scales explained 26% of the variance in perceived worklife fit [$F(3, 60) = 7.09, p < .001$]. As in the previous analysis, only cynicism ($\beta = -.53, t = -3.22, sr^2 = .13, p < .01$) emerged as a significant predictor; scores on exhaustion ($\beta = .03, t = .18, sr^2 = .00, p = .86$) and professional efficacy ($\beta = .00, t = -.01, sr^2 = .00, p = .99$) were not significant predictors of perceived worklife fit. Consequently, among the three dimensions of burnout, cynicism emerged as the only significant predictor of both turnover intention and perceived worklife fit.

Finally, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to evaluate how well cynicism- the only significant predictor from the burnout scales - and worklife fit predicted participants' turnover intention. Combined together, cynicism and perceived worklife fit explained 29% of the total variance in turnover intention [$F(2, 61) = 12.31, p < .001$]. In this analysis, both worklife fit ($\beta = -.27, t = -2.18, sr^2 = .06, p = .03$) and cynicism ($\beta = .34, t = 2.72, sr^2 = .09, p = .01$) emerged as a significant predictors of turnover intention.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine factors that affect levels of burnout, perceived worklife fit, and turnover intention in counselor education faculty members from CACREP-accredited universities in the United States. No statistically significant differences emerged based

on the demographic factors of gender, tenure status, or race in terms of levels of burnout in counselor education faculty. These results are not overly surprising, as previous research had not found consistent results related to these factors (Hill, 2009; Lease, 1999; Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002; Marchiori & Henkin, 2004; Maslach et al., 2001; Sangganjanavanich & Balkin, 2013). The present study found moderate levels of exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy, tolerable-to-satisfactory perceived worklife fit, and a low level of turnover intention in counselor education faculty. This is also comparable to other studies of university faculty (McClenahan et al., 2007; Rothmann & Barkhuizen, 2008; Taris, Schreurs, & Scahufeli, 1999).

This study found that perceived worklife fit and turnover intention have a strong, inverse relationship. Neither perceived worklife fit nor turnover intention varied based on gender, tenure status, or race for counselor educators in this study. Two of the three burnout subscales, exhaustion and cynicism, were strongly correlated with the other key variables in this study. Exhaustion and cynicism were negatively correlated with perceived worklife fit, whereas exhaustion and cynicism were strongly correlated with turnover intention. When workers feel a strong sense of fit in the workplace, they are more engaged, have lower burnout, and exhibit higher organizational commitment (Cho, Laschinger, & Wong, 2008). However, when organizational changes occur, it can threaten the perceived worklife fit (Caldwell, Herold, & Fedor, 2004).

Of the burnout subscales, only cynicism predicted both perceived worklife fit and turnover intention in this sample. However, when combined, cynicism and perceived worklife fit predicted nearly 30% of turnover intention in the sample. Faculty members subjectively assess multiple factors in their work environment to determine perceived worklife fit. Frequent organizational change can breed cynicism regarding change, and can impact morale,

performance, and turnover (Caldwell et al., 2004). Incongruence in expectations or changes over time that result in incongruence in the workplace can result in burnout (Leiter & Maslach, 2005) and turnover intention (Castiglia, 2006); whereas, individuals experiencing congruency in factors important to themselves report higher occupation commitment and engagement (Lindholm, 2003; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

A complex interaction exists among factors determining fit in the work environment, and personal and institutional factors that play a role in whether a faculty member intends to leave. The results of this study demonstrate the need for additional attention to this matter in counselor education and beyond to recruit, support, and retain faculty.

Limitations

There were several limitations to the present study. This study used online self-report data. Although online research has advantages such as ease, overall cost, and time expended, there are disadvantages due to response rate and self-selection bias (K. B. Wright, 2005). This study did have a low response rate (8%); therefore, it is possible that participants who completed the study are categorically different from those who chose not to participate. It is possible that some participants may be more eager to speak about their experiences, whereas others may not take the time to complete a voluntary survey. Finally, the present study was cross-sectional and administered once; therefore, there is no way to know whether the results would fluctuate if participants were to complete the survey again. The study was designed to collect data during the mid-point of the spring quarter or semester (i.e., in February and March) to avoid the natural stress of the beginning and end of the academic term. However, due to the low response rate, the survey response period lasted until late April, much longer than anticipated. The proximity of responses near the end of the semester may have influenced the magnitude of the responses.

Implications and Future Directions

Despite the limitations of this exploratory study, the results contribute to the small but growing scholarship focused on wellness in higher education. Given the results of this study and what is already known in the literature, recommendations can be made to prevent burnout, reduce turnover intention, and improve perceived worklife fit specifically in counselor education.

When individuals choose a workplace, a psychological contract is formed. The terms of this psychological contract are revised over time; however, unrealistic expectations and reality shock can weaken the contract, and administrative changes can occur that violate the contract completely (Andersson, 1996; Rousseau, 2001). As indicated from the results of this study, when perceived worklife fit is low and symptoms of burnout, particularly cynicism, increase, the risk of turnover intention grows.

For doctoral candidates and graduates applying for positions in counselor education, the significance of being true to one's academic philosophies and values, personal and professional goals, and needs regarding work priorities cannot be overstated. Applicants need to understand their own needs regarding the six areas of worklife and strive to find a consistent environment. Doctoral training programs can emphasize building self-awareness, developing, and implementing self-care practices to manage stress, and faculty can model these behaviors themselves. To prepare students for the realities of work in academia, programs can create opportunities to be involved in research, teaching, and service, and can educate students about the political nature of academia and expectations beyond teaching, scholarship, and professional service (Rice et al., 2000). Magnuson, Norem, and Lonneman-Doroff (2009) suggested that applicants interviewing for positions should investigate "workload, expectations for scholarship and service, support for research, requirements for tenure and promotion, camaraderie among

counselor educators, potential for effective mentoring, and program philosophies” (p. 68).

Acquiring a more thorough understanding of the life of a faculty member could substantially mitigate the reality shock experienced by many upon entering a higher education career.

This study contributed to the professional literature with additional data not captured in Bartley’s (2005) dissertation study. The previous study examined internal and external factors associated with burnout, and the researcher suggested examining the interplay between these factors contributed to burnout. The Areas of Worklife Scale AWS (AWS; Leiter & Maslach, 2004) would be helpful in future research to further examine the role these distinct areas have in burnout in counselor education faculty to develop a mediation model to learn more about the interrelationships between them. Researchers could also examine university environment elements to better understand the organizational impact on individuals’ burnout and how it may contribute to turnover. Xu’s (2008) work suggested that the “subjective perception of work environment plays a more critical role in faculty turnover than the objective conditions” (p. 58); therefore, learning what factors are important in creating a positive work environment that nurtures the professional growth of faculty could be critical to retaining good faculty. Finally, researchers could compare counselor educators with faculty from other disciplines to determine whether there are unique factors contributing to burnout and turnover in counselor education not present in faculty from other fields.

Conclusion

In this sample of counselor education faculty, cynicism and fit together predicted turnover intention. In higher education, faculty members experiencing cynicism may result in disengagement and can have a negative impact on the academic environment for students and professional colleagues alike. For faculty who have created mental distance between themselves

and their students or workplace, exploring what is contributing to this behavior can give rise to a solution, which could be seeking mentoring, a diversion of resources, or exploring options for departure. Changes in both the individual and the environment may be necessary to improve the experience of work.

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