Exploring Self-Compassion and Job Satisfaction Among School Counselors

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Abstract

This article represents a qualitative study that explored the role of self-compassion in school counselors using the theory of work adjustment (TWA) as a framework (Todd, 2017). Data were analyzed using the 20 TWA work reinforcers and corresponding six value dimensions (achievement, autonomy, status, altruism, comfort, safety) in order to explain how these reinforcers and values may impact self-compassion and the wellness of counselors in the workplace. Seven school counselors participated in semi-structured interviews surrounding their self-care at work and self-compassionate behaviors. The study found 19 of the 20 TWA reinforcers were attributable to significant satisfaction at work; these were discussed throughout the seven participant interviews. In addition, the findings supported how constructs related to the practice of self-compassion such as mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness are evident within the six corresponding work values in TWA and play an integral role in describing ways in which school counselors conceptualize wellness at work. Implications for school counselors are discussed.

Keywords: self-compassion, school counselor, job satisfaction, theory of work adjustment

Introduction

According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2019), school counselors are educators who serve all students through the integration of a comprehensive school counseling program focused on student success. Due to the very nature of this job, school counselors often face multiple professional, and at times, competing job duties that can lead to increased levels of stress at work, compassion fatigue, and possible burnout (Mullen et al., 2017; Mullen & Crowe, 2017). Recently, an independent data-analysis organization aggregated résumés of school counselors using information from census data, employer, and demographic variables (e.g., years on the job). It was found that up to 81% of school counselors left the profession at or before 10 years (Zippia, 2021). Similarly, in discussing counselor burnout, Grosch & Olsen (1994) described how the average career span of a counselor is approximately 10 years. Along with rising job demands, budget cuts have also led to counselor shortages that have exacerbated the situation, leaving school counselors feeling pulled in many directions (DeMato, 2002). Additionally, Acker (2012) found a significant relationship between burnout in mental health workers and intent to leave the profession.

Literature Review

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU, 2019) released a report describing significant school counselor shortages across the United States. The report described school counselors as

being overworked, placing their well-being at risk. Data were reviewed from every school district in the nation, and it was found that 90% of public schools in the United States are not meeting the recommended 250:1 (student-to-counselor) ratio (ASCA, 2016). These counselor wellness concerns are not new. In 2003 the American Counseling Association (ACA) initiated a task force that specifically examined the needs of counselors who were not functioning at optimal levels of professional performance and were suffering from impairments such as compassion fatigue and burnout (Lawson et al., 2007). The goal of this early initiative was to provide awareness and resources that included self-care practices to benefit professional counselors (Lawson et al., 2007). Self-care is a broad term that connects to individual well-being and encompasses areas such as physical, psychological, spiritual, professional, and personal support systems (Richards et al., 2010). Posluns and Gall (2020) reviewed the literature in the area of self-care among mental health practitioners and conceptualized practices to fall within the following domains: awareness, balance, flexibility, physical health, social support, and spirituality. Self-care has often been associated with exercise and time-off for medical/health check-ups (Thompson et al., 2011; World Health Organization, 2009), which occur outside of one's professional setting. However, integrating positive wellness practices within one's professional role may serve as a more holistic way to increase both personal wellness and professional job satisfaction among school counselors. The counseling profession provides ethical codes that discuss counselors' professional responsibility to be active participants in monitoring and sustaining their own well-being (ACA, 2014; ASCA, 2016). This includes integrating wellness behaviors as part of their self-care while practicing in the profession.

Literature surrounding self-care has highlighted several job-related stressors such as high student-to-counselor ratios (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016), limited opportunities for clinical supervision (Herlihy et al., 2002), and the lack of clearly defined job roles (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011; Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Chandler et al., 2018). Previous research has described how the lack of self-care among counselors may contribute to unhealthy outcomes such as chronic stress (Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016), burnout, and compassion fatigue (Thompson et al., 2011).

When looking at job-related challenges in a school counseling context, compassion fatigue and burnout can emerge when counselors are no longer able to meet their own needs and the needs of those they serve due to job-related stress (Maslach, 2017). By contrast, counselors who prioritize their own emotional and physical wellness are at a lower risk for burnout and compassion fatigue (Lawson et al., 2007). Burnout and compassion fatigue can also result in job dissatisfaction (Caple, 2018), are associated with negative emotional outcomes in some counselors (Figley, 2002), and may even put students at risk for harm (Lawson & Myers, 2011).

Job satisfaction has been associated with general life satisfaction (Walsh & Eggerth, 2005). Therefore, counselors who prioritize their own wellness and incorporate self-care practices that promote balance may contribute to positive wellness outcomes professionally and personally (Todd, 2017). One avenue for this can be through the practice of self-compassion.

Self-Compassion

Self-compassion can be conceptualized as a different way to relate to oneself when struggling with circumstances that cause emotional, mental, or physical discomfort (Neff & Dahm, 2014; Patsiopoulos & Buchanan, 2011). Research demonstrates how the practice of self-compassion is effective in impacting wellness and decreasing stress (Neff, 2003b, 2011; Neff & Germer, 2012). This practice consists of three correlated factors: mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness (Neff, 2003b).

Mindfulness

In the practice of self-compassion, mindfulness involves an awareness of the "here and now" experiences of the individual while zoning in on any feelings of struggle or suffering that are brought into awareness (Neff & Dahm, 2014). The premise of mindfulness, as it is related to self-compassion, is to first acknowledge that one is experiencing a moment of difficulty, then to integrate the practice of self-kindness in order to soothe oneself through the moment.

Common Humanity

Common humanity relates to the idea that we all have experienced some form of struggle or suffering at some point in our life, and this is universal. Kristen Neff (2003b) defines common humanity as "seeing one's experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as separating and isolating" (p. 89).

Self-Kindness

The third construct is self-kindness, and this involves choosing to be forgiving to oneself in times of struggle, just as you would do for a loved one. Neff (2003b) defines self-kindness as "extending kindness and understanding to oneself rather than harsh judgment and self-criticism" (p. 89).

Research indicates that mental health practitioners who engage in self-compassion have overall higher levels of physical and psychological well-being (Nelson et al., 2018). More specifically, school counselors who integrate self-care activities, such as the practice of self-compassion, have described how this practice has aided in addressing job-related stressors in K–12 settings (Todd & Chehaib, 2019). Therefore, the research suggests self-compassion, as a form of self-care, may help mitigate burnout attributed to high levels of stress in the school counseling profession.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of work adjustment (TWA) is a framework that provides a way to conceptualize the connection of an individual to their work environment with the outcome of predicting retention in the profession (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984). This theory is based on the idea that people have needs and abilities as related to their work environment. Lofquist and Dawis (1978) incorporated 20 work reinforcers taken from the Minnesota Importance Questionnaire (MIQ) to understand how the needs and values of an individual can be reinforced by the work environment, influencing job satisfaction. The 20 work reinforcers are: ability utilization, achievement, activity, advancement, authority, company policies, compensation, co-worker relations, creativity, independence, moral values, recognition, responsibility, security, social service, social status, supervision/human relations, supervision/technical, variety, and working conditions. Lofquist and Dawis (1978) discovered that a useful way to organize these 20 work reinforcers was to sort them into six areas of value dimensions: achievement, autonomy, status, altruism, comfort, and safety.

This theory concentrates on the variability in behavior and highlights the unique aspects of behavior that differentiate individuals from each other; thus, it allows for explanations of different outcomes for individuals who are experiencing similar situations (work environments) (Dawis, 2005). For example, a school counselor who understands the importance of self-care and also prioritizes self-compassionate behaviors may find they are able to manage job-related stressors and have a satisfactory experience in their work environment and, as a result, stay in their position for longer. In contrast, a school counselor in the same school, who may either not prioritize their own wellness, or lack the skills necessary to provide self-care and/or self-compassionate behaviors, may find they are unable to manage job-related stressors and have an

unsatisfactory experience in the same work environment and, as a result, leave the school or the profession as a whole. Therefore, when there is a lack of alignment between tasks (promote wellness in others) and abilities (promote wellness in self), job dissatisfaction, job stressors, and possible attrition may ensue. With respect to job-related stressors, TWA emphasizes that the more one's abilities correspond with work environment and/or work environment corresponds with abilities, the more likely job satisfactoriness will occur (Swanson & Fouad, 2014). When this correspondence is present, a likely outcome is retention in one's profession (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984), and this has also been linked to well-being in individuals (Eggerth, 2008).

The research is sparse in exploring how counselor self-care using self-compassion relates to the TWA. Therefore, the aim of this qualitative study explores school counselors' perceptions and experiences related to the practice of self-compassion within their professional roles using the framework from TWA.

Methods

Study Design and Selection Criteria

The following criteria were used in the selection of the seven school counselors in this study: (a) Participants were current practicing school counselors; (b) Participants were screened using the Health Promoting Lifestyle Profile II (HPLP II; Walker & Hill-Polerecky, 1996) and the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003a); (c) Participants had 10 or more years of experience as a practicing school counselor. Wellness can be defined in this study as a lifestyle with the aim of integrating body, mind, and spirit in order to move toward optimal health and well-being (Myers et al., 2000). Wellness was operationally defined from a total overall mean wellness score of 2.5 or higher on the HPLP II and the SCS.

Participants

The sample included seven school counselors, who all identified as White, non-Hispanic women. All but one of the participants resided in the Southeast region of the United States, and one worked as a school counselor in the Midwest region. The three different levels were represented with five participants working in the elementary setting, one in the middle school setting, and one in the high school setting. Participants ranged in age from 36 to 55 years old, with a mean age of 47. School counselor experience ranged from 10 to 32 years. Upon the university's Institutional Review Board approval, those interested in participating could access the study through a link provided on the Florida School Counselor Association (FSCA) website. This association was chosen as it has an enrollment of 732 members who identified as a school counselor in the state of Florida. This link contained two screening instruments used to identify the final pool from which the participants were selected. Thirteen school counselors completed the surveys (screening tool). Out of the 13 surveys, 11 were found to meet the inclusion criteria of 2.5 or higher mean score on both surveys. These 11 eligible school counselors were then emailed and invited to take part in the semi-structured interview portion. Seven out of the 11 participants responded and moved forward in the study. Although only seven out of the eleven eligible participants responded to the request to participate in the semi-structured interview portion of the study, thematic saturation seems to have been reached, as the majority of the TWA work reinforcers had emerged during the coding of the last interview. Additionally, this number of participants is also supported in similarly designed qualitative research within the school counseling literature (Fleshman, 2017; Sikes et al., 2012).

Instruments

Two screening tools (HPLP II; SCS) were used to identify only those participants who scored average to high in total wellness and self-compassion. Within both instruments used, a mean score of 2.5 or higher indicated average to high levels of total wellness and self-compassion (Neff, 2003a; 2003b; Walker & Hill-Polerecky, 1996).

Health-Promoting Lifestyle Profile II

The HPLP II contains 52 questions scored on a 4-point scale (1= *never*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *often*, 4 = *routinely*) with results yielding an overall total health-promoting lifestyle score. This questionnaire was intentionally used to identify each counselor's overall wellness mean score. Higher mean scores on the HPLP II (2.5 or higher) indicate higher levels of total wellness. Walker and Hill-Polerecky (1996) established this scale as valid and reliable, with a Cronbach's alpha for the overall score of .94 and alpha coefficients for the six categorical scores ranging from .79 to .97. The HPLP II also has been used in research that examines positive lifestyle behaviors in health professionals (Stark et al., 2005), in which Cronbach's alpha for the total scale score was .91. Additionally, the HPLP II has been used in wellness research that included school-based personnel in school settings in which the Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was .93 and the six dimensions ranged from .77 to .89 (Leung et al., 2009).

Self-Compassion Scale

The SCS measures participants' level of self-compassion and contains 26 items (Neff, 2003a) that yield a total self-compassion score by posing questions that explore individuals' thoughts, feelings, and actions (Neff, 2016). Six subscales yield the total self-compassion score: mindfulness, common humanity, self-kindness, over-identification, self-judgment, and isolation (Neff, 2003a). Mean scores of 2.5 or higher equate to greater levels of individual self-compassion. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *almost always* to 5 = *almost never.* The SCS has shown good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.92$), with the individual sub-scale constructs ranging from .75 to .81 in college students (Neff, 2003a). The SCS has also demonstrated good internal consistency in other populations, including adults in general populations (Costa et al., 2015), with Cronbach's alpha reported at .91.

Semi-Structured Interview

Open questions in qualitative research provide space for participant feedback without any constraints on their responses (Patton, 1990). Therefore, a semi-structured interview format using open-ended questions was chosen. The interview questions were developed by the primary author, were informed from a review of the literature examining counselors' wellness behaviors, and were constructed to capture narratives in the areas of self-care and self-compassion.

All recorded participant interviews were transcribed by the primary author. The interview protocol contained the following probes: (a) What influenced your decision to become a school counselor? (b) How would you describe your typical workday? (c) To what extent do you integrate/incorporate positive lifestyle behaviors into your daily life? (d) To what extent do you think you integrate self-compassion into your life personally and professionally? (e) What has been your experience in trying to help others learn to make wellness a priority? (f) What formal education/training have you received about self-care and the practice of self-compassion? and (g) What recommendations do you have for other school counselors in regard to wellness and the practice of self-compassion?

Interview Pilot Testing

Cognitive interviewing is a procedure that is used to assess response error, in which the focus is primarily on the interview questions, as opposed to the procedures in the questionnaire's administration (Willis, 2004). Five counselors were interviewed using the cognitive interviewing verbal probing technique in order to provide feedback and reduce survey error. Willis (2004) described verbal probing as a process by which the interviewer asks the original question, with subsequent questions designed to probe for more detailed information relevant to the original question. The verbal probing methods used in this cognitive interviewing procedure included: the paraphrasing probe, the comprehension/interpretation probe, and a general probe asking counselors to answer the level of difficulty (easy, medium, hard) of the question. An example of a cognitive interview probe is as follows: Can you repeat the question in your words? (paraphrasing probe). Results of the cognitive interviewing process found that two of the participants made a comment regarding the wording of the third question. Both suggested adding the word "incorporate" to follow "integrate" in order to aid in the understanding of the question. The new interview question reads as follows: To what extent do you think you integrate/incorporate positive lifestyle behaviors into your daily life?

Data Analysis

A deductive approach was chosen for the data analysis of the transcripts. Deductive coding is a structured approach in which a predetermined set of codes are identified. This results in the creation of a codebook comprised of examples that are then matched to excerpts found within new data collected (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). When conceptual frameworks and pre-set codes are available to guide the analysis, deductive coding has been found to be applicable (Collins & Stockton, 2018). Informed by the analysis procedure (e.g., deductive coding) from a similarly designed study utilizing 20 work reinforcers found with TWA (Eggerth & Flynn, 2012), this structured approach using deductive coding was implemented. The predetermined set of codes, used by the two authors, were the 20 work reinforcers that came from the MIQ. The MIQ (Weiss et al., 1967) also provided the authors the definitions that guided the creation of the codebook to aid in initial coding. Both authors first independently read through the participant interviews and fit the school counselor participant responses into the 20 work reinforcers within TWA. The authors then met to discuss/compare outcomes until consensus was met on this final coding of the transcripts.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established in several ways. For example, member checking allowed participants to review and edit the transcripts for accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The two authors of the current study, who made up the research team, independently coded each of the seven transcribed interviews using the codebook containing the 20 work reinforcers. To address dependability, each researcher subsequently generated memos and notes identifying areas that aligned with the examples from the codebook to create an audit trail (Saldaña, 2013). The researchers then met to cross-check data for accuracy and relevancy with any discrepancies discussed and resolved. After preliminary coding, the transcripts were externally reviewed by an outside researcher for alignment and consensus with the TWA reinforcers to aid with reliability throughout the coding process and minimize researcher bias. Confirmability was addressed through the integration of multiple data sources to explore areas of counselor wellness, also called triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For example, in addition to the semi-structured interviews and reflective memos, two screening tools were used to provide more information about the wellness behaviors of the participants.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent and confidentiality were areas addressed with participants as ethical considerations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Participant information was coded with no relationship to personal identifiers. Each participant's information was kept private and confidential and only coded data were used for analysis. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was given a pseudonym, and no real names or personal identifiers were mentioned in any communication regarding the study and its outcome. Additionally, participants had the right to review transcripts as well as withdraw from this study at any time.

Findings

The authors found through analyzing the transcripts that 19 of the 20 TWA reinforcer needs were attributable to significant satisfaction at work; these were discussed throughout the seven participant interviews. Advancement was the only reinforcer of the 20 listed that was not mentioned in the participant interviews. Rather than discuss each of the 19 reinforcers, the findings will be explained in a more succinct manner using the six work values. For example, representative quotes were used to demonstrate alignment with each of the six work value dimensions within TWA. Additionally, brackets were used to identify self-compassion constructs within participant quotes.

Achievement

According to Dawis and Lofquist (1984), the value of achievement is connected to the work reinforcers of ability utilization and achievement. These reinforcers are associated with the following: the satisfaction an individual receives from a job well done, the ability to successfully work through adversity, and finding meaning in one's work. Within this study, the value of achievement was evident across all seven school counselor responses.

Given that the school counselor role is a helping position, it makes sense that the school counselors in this study all believe (or "express a belief") that they were making a positive difference in the lives of students even if they did not see these outcomes right away. It was evident by their responses that the participants discerned meaning from their roles, demonstrating the nuanced ways in which school counselors find satisfaction in a job well done. The participant below discussed how this achievement value translated to the faculty and staff, as well as to themselves:

> I have a lot of teachers that come and see me…They stop by my office and when they do, I can tell it's been a bad day. I find myself (doing) a lot of encouraging of other staff members to take care of themselves because education isn't an easy field and people don't understand.

Self-Compassion as it Relates to Self-Care

Within the achievement work value, self-compassionate behaviors seemed to be woven into how the school counselors handled adversity to continue in their helping roles. This was evident in the following participant response:

> You know how some people look at a glass as half full or half empty. So, it's your attitude about life and what's going on {mindfulness}. Hey, everybody makes mistakes {common humanity}, so you don't condemn yourself when you make the mistake. You have to realize that we're all human {common humanity} …you can just say hey I made a mistake and I'm going to learn from it {self-kindness}.

This is just one of the subtle ways that demonstrates how a school counselor's self-compassionate perspective can support how they find meaning in their work, even in the midst of difficulties.

Autonomy

Dawis and Lofquist, (1984) connect the reinforcers of creativity and responsibility with the value of autonomy. These reinforcers are associated with the satisfaction an individual feels when they have the freedom and flexibility to make decisions connected to their professional roles. In this study, three out of seven school counselor responses describe both creativity and responsibility. The value of autonomy was represented in the following way:

> One of the counselors on the westside had talked about doing a "girls on the run" club a few years ago at one of our meetings and I had been getting into running personally at that time and I thought, wow, that would be really cool to do… and I said, I would like to do this...so, this is now the 3rd year where we have been doing it.

Self-Compassion as it Relates to Self-Care

Role ambiguity may inhibit a counselor from having the freedom and flexibility to make decisions, as counselors are often tasked with non-counseling duties that diminish their sense of agency and autonomy (Chandler et al., 2018). As such, this may lead some within a school setting to have a misunderstanding regarding the role of a counselor (Caple, 2018), causing counselors to need to advocate for themselves by informing others of their roles within the school (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011; Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011). To mitigate some of the stress that can result from these continued misperceptions of how counselors use their time, self-compassion was described as a powerful practice to address these occurrences. A sample quote is below:

> There are some schools and some places where they don't necessarily have a great view of what counselors are supposed to be, or of what their jobs are and what their day to day tasks should be and you have to speak out and not only be an advocate for your kids but also for yourself on some occasions{common humanity} and it is okay to do that and it is healthy to do that {self-kindness} because sometimes people will try to take advantage of you and that can be so stressful as well {mindfulness}.

Status

Dawis and Lofquist, (1984) describe status as being associated with the reinforcers of advancement, recognition, authority, and social status. The fulfillment that comes from being commended for a job well done, having the ability to lead within an organization, and having the respect of stakeholders all are associated with this work value. The value of status was described by five out of seven school counselors. A representative quote follows:

> Now that the district is paying for our positions, we are meeting every month. I bring up these things about going to conferences and training to take care of ourselves. It's not just me that I focus on, but everyone I work with.

Self-Compassion as it Relates to Self-Care

School counselors are leaders within the school environment (Wingfield et al., 2010) and as such, they also provide consultation on the importance of self-care to their school faculty and staff who may be showing signs of impairment (ACA, 2014). The following is a representative quote that describes how a school counselor influences her administration to prioritize their own well-being:

> They (administration) talk shop and they eat at their desks, and I have told them that it is not healthy for you, you need to de-stress {common humanity}, you need to give yourself a break {self-kindness} and not work through your lunchtime, but they just continue to do it {mindfulness}.

Altruism

Altruism is associated with the TWA reinforcers: coworker relations, social service, and moral values (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984). These reinforcers exemplify the feeling of contentment that comes from being able to have amicable relationships with colleagues, make a positive contribution to society, and act with integrity. According to the literature, levels of altruism help to mitigate burnout among school counselors (Limberg et al., 2016) and this also aligns with participant responses. For example, meaningful co-worker relations were represented by gift giving and not expecting anything in return. Others mentioned the importance of having a sense of family connection at work. The value of altruism is displayed within five out of the seven participant interviews and is represented below:

> This week is national school counseling week. I've given each of my staff members personalized cards... To me, I don't expect anything back, but it's just for them so then they know how important they are for me, my role in the school, and for the kids at the school.

Self-Compassion as it Relates to Self-Care

An altruistic person has been described as someone who does something for others' rather than for their self-promotion (Post et al., 2002). It makes sense that most participants described altruistic behaviors, as this often is a characteristic associated with a school counselor (Limberg et al., 2016). Self-compassion may be a complementary practice for altruism, as it offers a way for counselors to soothe and nourish themselves while caring for others. Self-compassion characteristics described in this study included practicing patience and being proud of displaying compassionate behaviors toward self and others. Constructs of self-compassion related to altruism are evident below:

> It has been fifteen years since I've been a middle school level counselor and a lot has changed. I have needed to regularly practice patience {mindfulness} and self-compassion. I have learned that I not only pride myself in being compassionate toward others {common humanity} and I allow myself to be compassionate toward myself {self-kindness}.

Comfort

The value of comfort is associated with reinforcers such as activity (the satisfaction the individual obtains from being active and productive each day), independence (having the freedom to work independently), variety (having the opportunity to work on different job assignments), compensation (being compensated well), security (stable and steady employment), and working conditions (working in a physically comforting environment) (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984). School counselors in this study described staying active during the day due to the array of activities that the job itself requires and being able to retire comfortably. A representative quote follows:

> I wanted a career that would support me having children and being able to be with them when they weren't in school. Now my work schedule is much more conducive to be able to practice self-care.

Interestingly, previous literature has highlighted how school counselors' level of comfort can become threatened when state and government legislation lacks mandates for counseling programs to be in schools, as job-security and job satisfaction are impacted (DeMato, 2002).

Self-Compassion as it Relates to Self-Care

The value of comfort emerged within the participants' responses and seemed to enable counselors to recognize that one is in a moment of struggle, while also having the choice to be able to walk away from a stressful situation and treat oneself with kindness. This aligns with previous research conducted by Neff and Germer (2012) that described a self-compassionate response as, "pausing first to offer oneself soothing comfort" (p. 28). A representative quote is below:

> When I catch myself getting worked up, I do more breathing {mindfulness}. So, breathing is what I do to calm myself down {self-kindness}. I just get my breathing under control and then I kind of do my self-talk of "calm down you are going to get through this {self-kindness}, this is all new and it is part of the process {Common humanity}.

Safety

Dawis and Lofquist (1984) link reinforcers such as company policies, supervision-human relations, and supervision-technical with the value of safety. The value of safety is associated with the satisfaction an individual receives from a place of employment that has fair and transparent work policies as well as a supervisor who is approachable, professional, and quick to respond to employee questions and concerns. Interestingly, within the participants' responses the work value of safety was the only value in which there appeared to be some ambivalence in capturing the rewards available to the school counselors from work. For example, school counselors understood their professional role within a school; however, they described not feeling understood by the district as it pertained to the roles and responsibilities of a school counselor. Additionally, school counselors described some feelings of discomfort when encountering difficult professional situations related to supervision and work policies. In this study, four out of the seven participants described the value of safety. A representative quote follows:

> You know, I think overall, as a counselor, you know that you are there for the kids…then on the other end, you have pressure from the district to have certain pieces of paperwork that have to be completed by a deadline...I feel like sometimes the district, or the people who are not necessarily in the building with us, don't understand what our roles should really be.

Self-Compassion as it Relates to Self-Care

Participants demonstrated the ways in which the practice of self-compassion was beneficial in managing difficult interactions such as being mindful of emotional distress and the importance of healthy boundaries to treat oneself kindly. The practice of self-compassion as it relates to safety was evident in the following response:

> I think it's important for counselors to be aware of their own stress levels{mindfulness}. You know kind of what we teach the kids, what is that that you say, I just need to say no {self-kindness}, or I just need to stop and shut my door for a minute…We don't want to complain {common humanity}, but with a caseload of 500 kids, plus 50 staff members and it's kind of like okay keep everything together.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how self-compassionate behaviors as a form of self-care emerged using the TWA as a framework. The present study found that 19 of the 20 TWA reinforcers representing all six of the TWA work values that are attributable to satisfaction at work, were described by the school counselor participants. Representative quotes were used to demonstrate alignment with each of the six work value dimensions. The reinforcer most frequently mentioned during the interviews was ability utilization, which was categorized under the work value of achievement. This is consistent with research that found school counselors' main motivations for entering the profession centered around the satisfaction found within helping students succeed (Ribak-Rosenthal, 1994).

One of the 20 TWA reinforcers (advancement) was not mentioned in the participant interviews. One possible explanation for the lack of representation is that the school counselor role is considered a specialized position and counselors' have previously achieved additional credentials/degree in relation to advancement in order to serve in this role. It is important to note that a small number of quotes reflected ambivalence when referring to the reinforcers found within the work value of safety. There may be a number of areas that may be contributing to this ambivalent view of the value of safety. For example, some areas that influence the value of safety are out of a school counselor's direct control such as nationwide counselor shortages (Mann et al., 2019) and role ambiguity (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011).

Connection to Self-Compassion

The practice of being self-compassionate emerged through the constructs of mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness and served as an integral role in describing ways in which school counselors conceptualize and promote wellness at work. For example, all participants described how they would incorporate self-compassionate behaviors to soothe themselves when facing adversity. With respect to the TWA framework, these self-compassionate behaviors could be described as how counselors integrate the practice of self-compassion to achieve and maintain correspondence within a work environment. This research uncovered specific ways school counselors maintained a sense of wellness through the incorporation of self-compassionate behaviors. For example: (a) with respect to the work value of achievement, self-compassionate behaviors seemed to be woven into how the school counselors handled adversity in order to continue to perform at a high level and utilize their abilities in their helping roles, (b) with respect to the work value of autonomy, self-compassion was described as a powerful practice that mitigates stress that can result with these continued misperceptions of a school counselor's role, (c) with respect to status, school counselors are leaders within the school environment (Wingfield et al., 2010) and provide feedback to their colleagues and supervisors on the importance of self-compassion as self-care, (d) with respect to altruism, self-compassion may be a complementary practice as it may offer a way for counselors to soothe and nourish themselves while in the process of caring for others, (e) with respect to comfort, self-compassionate behaviors such as recognizing that one is in a moment of struggle and having the ability to walk away from stressful situations and treat oneself with kindness were described as ways to support comfort within the work/school environment, (f) with respect to safety, self-compassion seemed to emerge as an important practice in providing a sense of agency through being mindful of emotional distress and by treating oneself kindly by advocating for the importance of healthy boundaries. The present study's results are consistent with Harnois's (2014) findings, which underscore the importance of incorporating healthy ways to cope with the stressors within the school counseling setting as it impacts job satisfaction.

Implications for School Counselors

There are some implications for school counselors related to wellness and the practice of self-care that arise from this research. School counselors are continuously exposed to the emotions and suffering of their students and are faced with challenges/stressors that are an innate part of their unique role in the school setting (Caple, 2018). For example, school counseling responsibilities such as large caseloads (Chandler et.al., 2018; Nobles, 2011), non-related counseling activities (DeMato, 2002), and role ambiguity (Butler & Constantine, 2005) are all known to impact overall counselor wellness and may contribute to counselor burnout (Kim & Lambie, 2018). Nobles (2011) conducted a study among school counselors at all levels and found that 70.4% reported feelings of stress and described how they sometimes, often, or always feel tightness in their back and shoulders. Conversely, Nobles (2011) found that school counselors who had caseloads of fewer than 300 students reported the lowest level of burnout. This is important to note as in comparison to middle and high school settings, many times there is only one counselor in an elementary school setting. As a result, middle and high school level counselors may experience lower student-to-counselor ratios, and this could impact counselors' level of stress and overall wellness.

Interestingly, in this study five out of the seven school counselors worked at the elementary level, with student to counselor ratios all above the recommended 250 to 1 (ASCA, 2016). However, the participants all reported average to high scores on overall wellness as found on the HPLP II and SCS. One explanation for this could be that the participants, specifically those at the elementary level, found ways to mitigate and buffer against chronic stress that can come with high student caseloads. For example, previous research has found participation in peer consultation and supervision to impact levels of stress in elementary school counselors (Culbreth et.al., 2005). Participants in this study also described how peer support and supervision were important components of job satisfaction as highlighted under the TWA work values of safety and altruism. These findings underscore the importance for not only elementary school counselors, but all levels to integrate these characteristics in order to impact levels of stress. Additionally, professional development for school counselors in the practice of self-compassion may also help to address this need as school counselors require more information on how to utilize internal resources such as the practice of self-compassion to provide comfort and nourishment in one's moment of need. School counselors who already demonstrate aspects of self-compassionate behavior may also benefit from more training in this area, as in previous research school counselors have described this lack of preparation (Todd, 2017). Strengthening self-compassionate behavior through more intentional application of this practice may encourage school counselors to nourish themselves in times of suffering and increase their sense of agency (Posluns & Gall, 2020). Furthermore, it is important that counselors possess ways to provide comfort to themselves in times of stress or struggle, that can also be integrated in a time-efficient and effective manner.

The impact of school counselors engaging in self-compassionate behaviors at work may result in a heightened sense of well-being (Neff, 2003b, 2011), greater ability to handle workplace challenges (Reizer, 2019), and increased probability to remain in the job (Dahling & Librizzi, 2015). Consequently, training in this area may also impact retention in the profession, as counselors will be proactively prepared with self-care and wellness practices that may buffer against effects of chronic stress and burnout.

Limitations

A number of limitations are worth noting. One limitation of this study may have been the recruiting process. Although the process provided a reliable means for screening appropriate

participants, the two-step process may have discouraged otherwise eligible participants. Another limitation is in the development of the interview questions. Although the questions were informed by the literature and pilot testing was done using a cognitive interviewing process, the survey questions were developed by the primary author, and this could present potential bias in the interview question development. Generalization of findings is an additional limitation due to small sample size and subjective experiences. Finally, the data are solely based on self-reports from school counselors who volunteered to participate in this study.

Future Research

Future research could include quantitative measures and correlational methods that look at interrelatedness between TWA reinforcers, their values, and self-compassion factors. Additionally, it would be useful to explore how wellness practices may differ among school counselors who are more culturally diverse. Finally, due to our rapidly changing world of work, especially due to the 2020 pandemic and the number of school counselors working remotely, future research may explore reinterpreting the reinforcers within TWA to reflect these new real-world realities.

Conclusion

In summary, this qualitative study represents an exploratory effort to understand the role self-compassion plays in counselor well-being at work using the TWA as a framework. Constructs related to the practice of self-compassion such as mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness were evident within the six corresponding TWA work values. Self-compassion was connected to work values in all participant interviews, and this may provide an explanation for the average to high wellness scores in the eligibility criteria for study participation. This may also demonstrate how the practice of self-compassion may influence wellness at work and help to buffer job-related stress. These findings highlight the importance of self-care strategies such as the practice of self-compassion as ways to help mitigate stress and increase job satisfaction among school counselors in their schools.

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