

Wellness of counselor educators: Do we practice what we preach?

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Abstract:

Wellness of counselor educators has remained relatively unexamined in the literature. Eleven counselor educators were interviewed to investigate the meaning of wellness to those in the profession as well as factors that affect counselor educator wellness. Phenomenological analysis of the interviews resulted in three themes (time, congruence, and professional supports). Implications for counselor educators and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Counselor education | prevention/wellness | qualitative research

Article:

Introduction

Although enhancing client wellness has long been considered a goal of counseling (Myers, 1992), until recently the wellness needs of counselors and counselor educators have received comparatively little attention (Wester, Trepal, & Myers, 2009; Lawson & Myers, 2011; Myers, Mobley, & Booth, 2003; Roach & Young, 2007). Consequently, little is known about the wellness of this population. Wellness is “a way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being, in which body, mind, and spirit are integrated by the individual to live life more fully within the human and natural community” (Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000, p. 250). Hill (2004), expanding upon Witmer and Young (1996), suggests that “well counselor educators may be more likely to produce well counselors who are more likely to produce well clients” (p. 136). If that is true, then a focus on the wellness of counselor educators should become a professional imperative. One study that did explore counselor educator wellness found that, overall, counselor educators are generally well, yet significant within-group variation does exist (Wester, Trepal, & Myers, 2009). What has yet to be determined is the meaning counselor educators attribute to wellness, their experience of wellness, and their perception of factors affecting their overall wellness.

Wellness in counselors

Although studies related to the wellness of counselor educators are limited, several researchers have examined the wellness of counselors (Lawson & Myers, 2011; Mobley, 2004) and counseling students (Myers et al., 2003). Lawson and Myers (2011) utilized the Five Factor Wellness Inventory (5F-Wel; Myers & Sweeney, 2004) and the Career-Sustaining Behaviors Questionnaire (CSBQ; Stevanovic & Rupert, 2004) to survey a group of professional counselors concerning wellness and behaviors that sustain careers. They found that professional counselors with high wellness ratings engaged in behaviors that helped them to sustain and enhance their work, such as maintaining the following: a sense of humor, spending time with family, work-life balance, self-awareness, and control over responsibilities at work (Lawson & Myers, 2011). Mobley (2004) utilized the Gender Role Conflict Scale (GRCS; O'Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 1986) and the 4F-Wel (Myers, Luecht, & Sweeney, 2003) and found that male professional counselors experienced greater wellness than males in the general population. Similarly, Myers et al. (2003) utilized the Wellness Evaluation of Lifestyle (WEL; based on Myers et al., 2000 Wheel of Wellness) and found that counseling students were more well than the general population, though within-group differences were prevalent.

Wellness and stressors in academia

Within academia in general, differences have been found among faculty with respect to stress and coping and subsequently to self-perceptions of well-being. Hendel and Horn (2008) reported the results of a national survey of 35,478 faculty and determined that the sources of stress in higher education have remained relatively unchanged for over 20 years. Reactions to stress are greater determinants of faculty satisfaction than are the stressors themselves. Severe reactions result in depression, lack of job satisfaction, poor tenure reviews, and intentions to leave academic work. Reactions vary by age, sex, and academic rank. Though sources of stress have remained relatively equal, the patterns of stressors changed in the 20-year time frame studied (Hendel & Horn, 2008). For example, the highest stressors reported among faculty are time pressures, lack of personal life, teaching load, managing household responsibilities, and dealing with red tape. Areas where stress has increased in the last decade included managing household responsibilities, physical health, caring for aging parents, dealing with students, and faculty meetings (Hendel & Horn, 2008).

Consistently, difficulties that females encounter have been found to be stressors (Cress & Hart, 2009; Hendel & Horn, 2008; Stinchfield & Trepal, 2010). Specifically, women experience a variety of stressors, such as sexist attitudes from students and colleagues (Cress & Hart, 2009), raising children and the perceptions of work-life balance (Stinchfield & Trepal, 2010), and faculty rank in relation to perceptions of work-life balance (Hendel & Horn, 2008; Stinchfield & Trepal, 2010). While most have found gender differences, conversely, Wester et al. (2009) reported few gender differences in wellness among counselor educators specifically.

Members of minority races in the United States, especially males, are known to have a lower life span and higher rate of disability than their Caucasian counterparts. Hence, the wellness needs of this subgroup of counselor educators may be especially acute (Administration on Aging, 2014), as they may feel both subtle and overt pressures to model wellness for their students, especially

students of color (Ascher, Butler, McCloud, Gonzáles, & Jain, 2009, p. 1). In fact, when Shillingford, Trice-Black, and Butler (2013) recently studied the wellness of minority female counselor educators, they found that this group perceived challenges with students, overwhelming workloads, high expectations, and feelings of alienation and lack of support.

Counselor educator wellness

Interestingly, while wellness is a pillar of counseling and has been “covered extensively in the literature, surprisingly, little research is available indicating the wellness needs of counselor educators and counselor educators of color” (Ascher et al., 2009; p. 2). Although not focused specifically on wellness, researchers examining counselor educators illuminated variables of interest for faculty in counseling. Factors such as life satisfaction, life-work balance, mentoring in doctoral and current employment environments, sense of control, and sense of bias (based on age, race/culture, and gender) influenced counselor educators’ desire to continue in academia and in their scholarly productivity (Leinbaugh, Hazler, Bradley, & Hill, 2003; Magnuson, Black, & Lahman, 2006; Magnuson et al., 2003).

Wester et al. (2009) studied wellness in a sample of 180 counselor educators using the Five Factor Wellness Inventory (5F-Wel; Myers & Sweeney, 2004) and the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). Overall, counselor educators’ scores on the 5F-Wel indicated that they have high levels of wellness. However, as perceived stress levels on the PSS increased, overall wellness scores decreased. While identifying and examining specific sources of stress were not a part of the study, this finding does have implications for counselor educators related to the relationship between overall wellness and stress levels.

These studies reveal a number of potentially important issues for counselor educators as determinants of self-perceived wellness. Most of the studies reviewed utilized surveys with instruments that measured wellness and/or stress and coping behaviors to examine wellness in professional counselors and counselor educators. However, the meaning of wellness to persons in the profession has not yet been determined. The present study was undertaken to address this gap. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to explore counselor educators’ experience of wellness and their perception of factors they believe contributed to or hindered their experience of wellness.

Method

The research question for the study was: What are counselor educators’ experiences of wellness? In order to answer this question, a qualitative phenomenological design, where participants’ experiences are valued, was used so that multiple realities could be acknowledged (Hays & Wood, 2011). Phenomenology is constructivist, in that multiple realities or perspectives of a phenomenon are valid (Patton, 2002). In addition, the end goal of phenomenological studies is to provide a deeper understanding of the essence of participants’ experiences of the phenomenon under investigation (Moustakas, 1994).

Researcher positionality

The four authors of this study were all counselor educators of different academic ranks who were interested in the topic of wellness. The first author, a full professor, was a noted authority on wellness, having codeveloped an instrument that measures the construct. The second and fourth authors, both associate professors, were also involved in the original study on counselor educator wellness. The third author, an assistant professor, joined the study as an external auditor. All authors worked to bracket out their assumptions and experiences with counselor educator wellness throughout the data analysis.

Participants

The participants consisted of counselor educators who were purposefully selected from another study in which they were surveyed related to wellness (see Wester et al., 2009). At the end of the earlier study, participants were asked to indicate if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up study to explore their experiences of wellness. From those volunteers, counselor educators were selected for this study based on three main criteria: (a) scores on the Five Factor Wellness Inventory (5F-Wel; Myers & Sweeney, 2004), (b) sex, and (c) rank as a counselor educator. More specifically, we wanted to ensure that all ranks (i.e., assistant, associate, and full professor) were represented, as well as both sexes, representing low and high wellness scores on the 5F-Wel in order to have a broad enough sample of participant perspectives. One male and one female participant were selected in each rank of assistant, associate, and full professor who had low and high wellness scores, resulting in a total of 12 counselor educators being selected for interviews. The final sample consisted of 11 counselor educators, based on participants who agreed to participate.

The final sample self-identified primarily as female ($n = 7$; males $n = 4$). There were seven Caucasian participants, and among the other races represented were African American ($n = 2$), Asian ($n = 1$), and biracial ($n = 1$). Average age was 49.12 ($SD = 12.46$, range 38 to 72; $n = 2$ did not respond). Three of the participants were assistant professors, four were associate professors, and three were full professors, with one being a full-time adjunct professor. Less than three-quarters ($n = 7$) were married or partnered, one was single, and one reported being separated. Two participants did not report their marital status. All except one participant reported having children ($n = 10$). Of those who had children, the average number of children was 2.11 ($SD = .92$; range 1 to 4). Seven of the 10 participants who had children reported that they currently lived with their children. Three did not presently live with their children due to divorce/separation or their children being adults. The majority of interviewees ($n = 9$) self-identified as heterosexual, with two participants self-identifying as gay or lesbian.

Data collection

Interviews were conducted over the telephone and lasted between 40 and 75 minutes. Three of the four researchers conducted interviews with participants. All interviews were conducted within a two-month time period. Interviews followed a semistructured format, or “guided conversation” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), with the basic questions being:

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
2. Tell me a little about your current position as a counselor educator.

3. Tell me a little about your family life or hobbies external to work.
4. How would you define wellness?
5. How well do you feel you currently? How does this compare to your normal state of wellness?
6. What impacts your wellness?
7. What are some of your thoughts about the wellness of counselor educators?

All interviews were recorded and transcribed for coding.

Data analyses

Consistent with Moustakas (1994), the researchers used a transcendental phenomenological data analysis procedure to analyze the data. First, the researchers bracketed out their own assumptions and experiences related to wellness and counselor educators (Wertz, 2005). Next, the first, second, and fourth authors examined each interview transcript separately to identify nonrepetitive words and phrases and group them together as open codes (Patton, 2002). Consistent with the horizontalization procedures of Moustakas, the next step was that the codes were identified as meaning units. This included identifying all perspectives on the phenomenon. Next, the same three authors consolidated their initial independent interview horizontalization process and worked together to compare and contrast their analyses until they arrived at a point of consensus. From there, the three authors clustered the statements together in an attempt to understand the textural meaning (i.e., the *what* of the experience) and the structural meaning (i.e., the *how* of the experience) related to the participants' responses (Moustakas, 1994). For example, initial clusters included: (a) support, (b) lifestyle, (c) modeling, (d) living out wellness, (e) work, (f) family, (g) flexibility, and (h) values. Finally, the textural and structural descriptions were collapsed into what Moustakas (1994, p. 100) refers to as "intuitive integration." This resulted in four themes.

An effort was employed in order to establish trustworthiness or validity of the data analysis. The third author, who was a counselor educator and familiar with the wellness literature, entered the study postinitial data analyses as a data auditor who reviewed the interview transcripts, as well as the textural and structural analyses and final themes. This author was able to assist with collapsing the four themes from the initial data analysis into the final three themes representing the essence of the participants' experiences. All names used are pseudonyms to protect participant identity.

Results

Participants' definitions of the concept of *wellness* were multifaceted, as the following quotes exemplify. Kelly, an assistant professor, said: "For me, wellness means having a balance of health and a sense of well-being in multiple areas of my life. I mean career, spiritually, physically, emotionally, mentally in my relationships." According to Joe, an assistant professor, wellness is "a combination of different things that make you feel good or not feel good, but I would think it would be physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual." The analysis of the 11 participants' interviews produced three themes (Time, Congruence, and Professional Supports) related to the participants' multifaceted lived experiences of wellness and the factors that they

believed impacted their wellness. All identifying information (e.g., university, geographical location) and demographic information, when it could be used to identify a participant, was removed from this manuscript to maintain anonymity. A full description and illustrative comments that exemplify the themes are included in the following. Pseudonyms are used.

Time

The first theme, Time, was defined in terms of the areas (e.g., personal, professional) in life in which the participant uses or values time and how that contributed to their overall wellness. The theme was connected to aspects of time that impacted the experience of wellness. Subthemes of Time included leisure, flexibility, and balance.

Leisure

Specific strategies used for leisure included the following: reading novels, gardening, eating ice cream, singing in the church choir, and exercise. In fact, the practice of engaging in physical exercise was mentioned by a majority of the participants. Specific types of exercise (e.g., tennis, running) and devoting time to exercise routines were also reported. According to Joe, an assistant professor:

I exercise about 5 days a week. I usually go running three days and then do some strength type exercises three times a week... I don't know if I'm an athlete, but I'm trying to hold off time.

Josie, a full professor, mentioned the following after being asked what she has time for when she is not working:

Well, I sing in the choir at church. And that's a lot of fun... I do exercise and so I always have time to make sure I do my running no matter what. And I think that helps keep me healthy. And we have a week when I'll go visit family and friends and have people over on the weekends. I try to get all work done during the week. So I may put in more hours during the week so that I don't have to do stuff over the weekend.

Flexibility

All of the participants described the ways in which flexibility played a role in their work as a counselor educator and how it related to their wellness. Some faculty discussed ways in which their work environment, by the very nature of the job, provided opportunities for flexible scheduling. Ken, an associate professor, reported,

One of the reasons that I love what I do is that I completely manage my own time. So I'm only in [state] for two days a week, but those days are 12–15 hour days. I usually leave late morning, around 11, and I usually get home around 9 or 10 in the evening. So what I do is I pack every minute of every hour.

While some participants described flexibility in terms of their work schedule, others described it in terms of the time with their children and families, as the following quote from Julia, an adjunct professor, typifies:

It's the greatest gig for a mom with two kids. I mean seriously, any field trip, any, anything, I can do it. My kids are in day care three days a week—that's it. Any doctor's appointment I have, there is no stopping my time. In so many ways I am like a stay-at-home mom; I could do work at three in the morning if I wanted to.

Finally, José, an assistant professor, described a downside to the job flexibility and not having regular work hours. He reported that the flexibility was impacting his marriage.

My marriage is not good. And that's one of the issues that came up in our own session, my work habits, because she came from a different type of family. You went to work at the same time every day and you came home at the same time every day. And you didn't work overtime. And you didn't work weekends. And you just lived. And I didn't grow up with that type of mentality. So it's been over the years, it's been really hard for her to deal with my work schedule even though I always took the time out for the family.

Balance

The importance of balance, especially related to using one's time to achieve a balance, was reported by a majority of participants. Some noted specific strategies regarding the use of their time that contributed to achieving balance, as the following quote from Marina, an assistant professor, typifies:

It depends on what I am doing, but I think that I work at home by choice because again it's important for me to be able to spend some time with my daughter during the day, and so I would rather spend time with her during the day and work at night when she goes to sleep. Again try to balance having a stable family life, making sure that my daughter feels like she has a mom at home that she can play with and interact with.

Congruence

The Congruence theme was defined as aspects of one's life, work, and family that contribute to one's wellness and lifestyle as a counselor educator in either positive ways or diminished wellness negative ones. Participants discussed how aspects of their current faculty positions were either congruent or not with their identity as a counselor educator. Susan mentioned the following:

Yeah, yeah, I really do enjoy that because I, I love what I do. I really enjoy it. I feel like what I teach matches who I am. I feel a congruence there. I don't feel like I'm having to do anything that's against who I am. And to me that's very important. And if I felt like I was having to do something that really went against who I was, I couldn't do it.

Three participants indicated that the time they spent engaging in some activities as counselor educators were less personally fulfilling or meaningful to them. For example, Julia indicated that she enjoyed the flexibility that online teaching provided, but she preferred the traditional, face-to-face method of teaching, as it was more congruent with her identity:

My core identity is really traditional because that's where my heart is; it's just the way my life has gone [accepting a counselor education position at an online university] with the kids and different choices, you know, wanting to move to a specific state because of, you know, different laws and so forth, you know. I've sort of, if it happens to me great, and there's a possibility that it will, and I will get a traditional role but so like I guess identity wise. I see myself loving the traditional much more because to me it's online is very solitary.

Finally, José mentioned incongruence between himself and a counselor education position that he formerly held:

The last university I taught at is a beautiful place; they're teaching in paradise, but I was very uncomfortable with my job. They wanted me to be something I'm not. And I couldn't do that. And so I noticed my total wellness went down.

Professional supports

The final theme, Professional Supports, is defined as the various supportive people, events, or personal and professional relationships that the counselor educators had in their lives that they felt contributed to or hindered their wellness. Subthemes include department chair, family/partner, and mentoring.

Department chair

Many of the participants reported that they had a supportive department chairperson. The following quote from Beth, as associate professor, provides an example:

My chair is extremely supportive. She allows me, I can sit down with her and go ok, listen I'm on this committee, this committee, this committee. And I am taking on this responsibility, so what are you going to take off my plate?

Family/partner

The support of family and significant others also appears to influence the wellness of counselor educators. Two participants indicated that their partner and/or family positively influenced their wellness as counselor educators. When prompted to describe what wellness meant to her, Karen, a full professor, stated the following:

I always remember someone said: someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to. And I would say that I have both, three things. I have a good marriage.

You know my husband's always been extremely supportive of what I do, and we do that as a mutual thing.

Joe agreed that family was the best source of support in dealing with stresses of work: "And I do value my family more than I value my work. At least that's what I think."

Mentoring

Half of the counselor educators in this study noted the importance of mentoring as a form of professional support related to their wellness. Marina indicated how positive mentoring related to wellness benefited her wellness and the way in which she noticed how other mentors were not as balanced:

I have had some great mentors, very well balanced, you know, seemed to have a very, a life full of wellness, and I also had some mentors and other counselor educators who are so kind of focused on profession that they don't have a very well life or balanced lifestyle.

Finally, Kelly summarized the three themes found in this study (Time, Congruence, Professional Supports) and articulated the importance of "practicing what we preach" in modeling wellness for future counseling students in the following statement:

I think that one place we can get started is by taking a look at our overall wellness. Where are we putting our time? Are these decisions that we really want to be making about how we spend our life? And incorporating more balance instead of letting our jobs drive what we do, take control of this is, this is how much time I'm going to spend. This is the absolute highest number of doctoral students I can take on for dissertation and do a high-quality job.

Discussion

This study of counselor educators' experiences of wellness was undertaken in order to attempt to understand their perspectives on the meaning of this phenomenon. The results of this study indicated that elements related to time, personal and professional congruence, and experiences with professional supports were key elements identified by the participants related to their experiences with wellness.

Based on the results of this study, counselor educators defined their wellness in terms of, and in some cases in spite of, their work environment. Our findings support the work of Magnuson et al. (2006) concerning the importance of connections, shared values, and mentoring. Further, the importance of mentoring, though not universal among our respondents, was clearly associated with greater wellness for half of our interviewees. In addition, the participants reported engaging in some of the same career-sustaining activities, including spending time with family, work-life balance, and control over responsibilities at work as the counselors in the Lawson and Myers (2011) study. The importance of time for the participants in this study echoed the results of Hendel and Horn's (2008) examination of the stressors of academic life.

Because we were interested in gaining the shared essence of counselor educators' experiences of wellness, we did not separately analyze interviews by sex or academic rank and therefore could not fully support the conclusions of earlier authors, notably Leinbaugh et al. (2003) concerning the impact of bias. Leinbaugh et al. also noted the importance of having a greater sense of personal control, particularly with respect to time management, which was consistent with our finding of the importance of the themes of Time and Congruence, as components of wellness among counselor educators.

Some limitations in the current study should be noted. This study was limited to 10 counselor educators. All participants were selected from an original study on wellness, in which they volunteered to participate. It is possible that those who volunteered had an intrinsically greater interest in or commitment to wellness than those who did not volunteer. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized to the larger counselor educator population. However, given the qualitative design, this study was not designed to provide generalized information. It was designed to examine the experiences and perspectives of these counselor educators who were identified as having potentially different perspectives on wellness (per Wester et al., 2009).

Implications for counselor education and supervision

The topic of wellness has taken center stage in the profession, and the issue of faculty wellness is no less important. Counselor education faculty positions are interesting in terms of their flexibility and also both the supports and stressors provided by individual circumstances (i.e., departments, colleagues, family composition). Individuals' identities (e.g., roles) and their work composition may be important variables related to individual wellness. Specifically, the positive and negative impact of work responsibilities on personal values and priorities (e.g., relationships, family roles and responsibilities, leadership) may influence counselor educators' individual wellness. Additionally, based on the emphasis participants in this study placed on mentorship with regard to their wellness, administrators and leaders in counselor education should consider implementing or improving upon mentoring programs for counselor educators at all levels.

Future research studies may want to explore the experiences of wellness for counselor educators at various intersections of their identities (e.g., sex, gender, race, ethnicity). The current study focused on the general experiences of wellness and did not delineate specific populations of faculty members. Future studies may also consider focusing on the wellness experiences of specific faculty ranks (e.g., adjunct, assistant, associate, and full professors). In addition, programs may use the information gleaned from this study when educating doctoral students who are interested in preparing to become counselor educators about wellness factors related to their positions.

Just as Witmer and Young (1996) argued that "well counselors are more likely to produce well clients" (p. 151), we postulate, based on the results of this study and Wester et al.'s (2009) study, that well counselor educators produce well counseling students who, in turn, can produce well clients. In a field where we have examined the relationship between counselor and client wellness, the actual living out of wellness related to faculty becomes an important piece of information.

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