

Burnout Among Rural School Psychologists¹

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This article discusses conditions in rural school settings which may create or exacerbate problems of burnout among rural school psychologists. Specifically, problems concerning role and function, professional support, visibility and preservice training are related to rural practice. Also, suggestions for coping with stress and burnout in rural settings are presented.

Burnout has become an important issue for a variety of helping professionals. In fact, it has been suggested that burnout may become the "catch-word" of the '80s [18]. Nonetheless, there has been a paucity of research concerning the incidence and nature of burnout among practicing school psychologists. That burnout may be a problem among school psychologists is indicated by a survey of Illinois school psychologists in which 48% of the respondents reported planning to leave the profession within five years [19].

Although burnout is likely to be a concern for all school psychologists, this paper focuses on school psychologists practicing in rural settings. Several writers have argued cogently that the ecology of rural areas exerts unique effects upon the practice of school psychology [8; 16, 20; 27]. For example, McLeskey, Huebner & Cummings [20] discussed idiosyncratic geographic, sociocultural, and professional practice conditions which uniquely influence rural school psychologists. Moreover, Wicker's [29] research on manning theory (i.e., staffing levels of organizations) suggested that chronic understaffing, a condition often found in rural schools, can increase the likelihood of burnout among staff members. Thus, rural settings include conditions which are especially conducive to burnout among staff, such as school psychologists. This has been supported by the findings of Hughes [15] who found the attrition rate among rural school psychologists to be four times greater than among urban school psychologists.

The purpose of this paper is to describe and discuss factors of rural areas which create or exacerbate problems of burnout among school psychologists. Additionally, suggestions for coping with stress and burnout in rural settings will be presented.

Literature Review

Freudenberger [9] initially developed the term burnout to describe the emotional and physical exhaustion of human service workers in alternative health care agencies. Maslach and Jackson [23] further elaborated the

construct to include the following three components. First, burnout reflects emotional exhaustion. As emotional resources are depleted, professionals report feeling unable to psychologically cope with the problems of their clients and develop a sense of "emotional numbness" [7]. Second, burnout includes a component of depersonalization, in which cynical attitudes toward clients develop. Burned out professionals become indifferent, if not callous, in their feelings toward their clients. A frequent result is "blaming the victim", i.e., blaming the clients for their difficulties. In short, such workers withdraw and become detached from their clients and colleagues. The third component of burnout is a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. This aspect is manifested in the burned out professionals' proclivity to develop feelings of being incompetent to help their clients. Thus, burnout has come to be viewed as a process of moving from an active problem-solving orientation to one of submission and indifference in response to the chronic, everyday stress of working in the human services professions.

Given these definitions, it should be noted that burnout and job dissatisfaction are not synonymous. Although the two may be related, burnout represents a broader, more inclusive construct representing a syndrome or cluster of behaviors and affects elicited in response to stressful working conditions.

The consequences of burnout also extend to the service provider's extra-occupational life. Frequently reported outcomes include physical problems; such as insomnia, headaches, ulcers, fatigue; drug and alcohol abuse; family and marital conflicts; and mental illness, such as depression and anxiety disorders [21]. In addition, the effects of burnout extend to the clients of the workers. For school psychologists, this includes numerous recipients of services, including children, parents, school personnel, and other community service providers. School psychologists who "burn out" thus lack the emotional resources to provide effective services to needy clients, although some burnout victims may work harder and longer hours in a misdirected effort to combat their feel-

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ings of being overwhelmed. In short, the debilitating effects of burnout have far-reaching effects. This is especially problematic in rural settings where school psychologists are needed to provide a wide array of services to clients at all levels of the organization [16].

The antecedents of burnout are likely to be many and varied. The following factors are likely to be of special importance to school psychologists practicing in rural areas and are derived primarily from Reiner and Hartshore [25] and the rural school psychology literature.

Application to Rural School Psychologists

Role Issues

Various issues related to role and function have been implicated in the generation of burnout [25]. Kahn [17] described three categories of role issues, including role overload, role ambiguity, and role conflict, which will serve as the basis for this discussion.

Role overload refers to situations in which the school psychologist becomes overloaded with excessive responsibility, which s/he feels unable to fulfill. Role overload may occur particularly in rural settings because of two major factors, i.e., a generalist role and heavy caseloads [20; 27].

As a result of inadequate personnel resources, many rural school settings can be described as understaffed settings, in which the number of professionals in a given program (e.g., pupil personnel services) is less than the optimal number necessary to effectively carry out the required activities of the setting. For example, in order to provide appropriate services to handicapped students, numerous professionals (e.g., special education teachers, physical therapists, speech and language therapists, social workers, reading specialists, etc.) may be required. This is problematic in rural areas where these professionals, if they exist, are few and scattered across numerous schools and clients. Under these conditions, school psychologists often report being needed to fulfill a wide variety of roles and functions, a generalist role [16]. This generalist functioning is in contrast to urban settings where specialization is more often valued. A rural practitioner may thus easily become overcommitted or asked to perform functions for which s/he has not been properly trained (e.g., neuropsychological screening, counseling adolescents). While there can be positive benefits associated with understaffing, especially in the short run, chronic understaffing is likely to result in professionals becoming cynical about their work and their clients, i.e., burned out [29].

Heavy caseloads have also been reported to be common in rural school settings [20; 27]. Although this is obviously a problem itself, the management of cases is also more difficult in rural areas due to high school psychologist/student ratios and the necessity to serve numerous scattered schools. In places where assessment is the most prevalent activity of the school psychologist, the repetitive nature of administering a similar battery of psychological tests may also lead to boredom and in-

creased propensity for burnout.

Finally, a secondary consequence of heavy caseloads probably further exacerbates burnout. Heavy caseloads diminish the amount of available time to do follow-up on referrals. This lack of opportunity for follow-up may contribute to school psychologists feeling that their efforts do not make a real difference in the lives of children, thereby further perpetuating the burnout cycle.

Role ambiguity also has been linked to burnout among school psychologists [25]. Role ambiguity exists when role definitions and/or performance expectations are unclear [17]. When such ambiguity exists, it is understandable that this represents a stressful and anxiety-provoking situation. That this is likely in rural settings is underscored by Trenary's [27] findings that lack of understanding of the role of the school psychologist by parents, teachers, and administrators was a significant problem among rural practitioners. This will probably continue to be a concern as many rural areas have only recently begun to receive school psychological services on a consistent basis [8].

Finally, role conflict can contribute to burnout. Role conflict refers to situations in which school psychologists are faced with ethical or professional conflicts [17]. This may be a particular problem in rural settings as many rural districts lack the financial resources to support the full continuum of mandated special education services [14]. Hence, school psychologists may be encouraged by their supervisors to recommend existing programs in cases where the least restrictive or most appropriate programs are too costly to provide. Such situations require school psychologists to make difficult decisions under "no-win" conditions.

Support Systems

The quality of support systems available to the school psychologist is related to burnout. The most important sources of support in the school system for the school psychologist include supervisors, colleagues, and other professionals (e.g., counselors).

The supervisor is perhaps the major key to the school psychologist's resistance to burnout. Supervisors are needed to provide technical assistance, feedback, and support, especially for beginning school psychologists [4]. Supervisors who are responsive to school psychologists' needs increase their feelings of confidence, competence, and control and hence reduce burnout. Adequate supervision can be a problem in rural settings as many rural school psychologists report that their primary supervisor is the school superintendent [6]. While superintendents may be well-intentioned, they are unlikely to be effective supervisors because few have been practitioners themselves. Thus, they are unfamiliar with the unique stresses related to the role of psychologist and thereby unable to offer necessary support. For example, supervisors who have never provided psychotherapeutic services to resistant adolescents are unlikely to be able to empathize with or provide the necessary technical expertise to help a school psychologist experiencing difficulties with such clients.

Superintendents who have not been trained as school psychologists probably do not have the perspective to critically or thoroughly evaluate a school psychologist's performance or to provide feedback in a manner conducive to professional growth.

Isolation from one's peers can also contribute to burnout. Maslach [22] has suggested that co-workers can provide technical help, comfort, insight, comparison, rewards, and escape. Unfortunately, professional isolation has also been reported as a major problem for rural school psychologists [3; 27]. Not only do many school psychologists report a significantly smaller number of peers in their settings [6], but the long distances from other sources of contact (e.g., universities) make it difficult to seek or find stimulation and support.

These difficulties are exacerbated by the itinerant nature of the school psychologist's function. Given the extensive travel time and typically large number of schools served by rural school psychologists [11], it seems likely that school psychologists face difficulties feeling "at home" in any or all of their schools. Thus they must cope with feelings of loneliness and isolation to a far greater extent than non-rural practitioners.

Visibility

Although many rural practitioners are isolated from peers, they are not isolated from the clients they serve if they live and work in a small town. Some practitioners have described living and practicing school psychology in a small town as analogous to "living in a fishbowl." This reflects the close contact all community members have with one another. Related to this concern, rural communities may exercise less tolerance for deviance in professionals' behavior and values. Thus, school psychologists who try to quickly introduce novel ideas or engage in behavior divergent from community norms may be met with considerable resistance and may ultimately be rejected altogether. In contrast, the school psychologist may have to be more tolerant and accepting of others, especially clients, than their urban counterparts because clients will be encountered on more occasions and in more diverse settings. As Hargrove [12] noted, rural practitioners must deal with the complexities of interacting with clients in multiple, overlapping relationships. This increases the likelihood of conflict between personal and professional roles as it is more difficult to maintain discrete professional-client relationships in small communities. Under these conditions, rural school psychologists cannot easily leave their work at the office nor hide behind professional role identities when faced with stress. Such constant visibility under varying conditions surely diminishes rural school psychologists' resistance to burnout.

Inadequate Preparation for Job

School psychologists who are not prepared adequately in their preservice training programs are likely to be at risk for rapid burnout. Although there is wide diversity among rural cultures, rural communities are different

from urban communities along a number of dimensions [13; 24; 26]. School psychologists from urban backgrounds who move into rural settings often experience "culture shock" and have been reported as likely to leave at the first chance [15]. This is perhaps especially a problem as few training programs include components of rural-focused training in their curricula [8; 20].

Coping Strategies

Strategies for preventing and remediating burnout are numerous and have been reported in a variety of sources [4; 10; 22]. Remedies include strategies at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and organizational levels. In this section, we will briefly note some strategies of particular relevance to rural school psychologists.

Strategies at the intrapersonal level focus on methods which school psychologists can use which do not involve others. Numerous strategies have been delineated such as relaxation, time management, recreational activities, and realistic goal setting. We believe that whatever strategy is applied must be tailored to the unique situation of the particular school psychologist and system involved. Given the diversity among rural settings [14], there is unlikely to be *one* generalizable coping strategy which will be effective across all rural settings and practitioners. Nonetheless, all successful intervention techniques do rest upon one essential pre-requisite activity; i.e., self-assessment. The most crucial component of a burnout coping technique begins at the individual level with practitioners who are aware of and sensitive to their own antecedents and manifestations of burnout. Prior to taking steps to overcome or prevent the occurrence of burnout, adaptive school psychologists must be able to recognize their own unique reactions which signal the onset of the burnout process. Thus, they need to be able to accurately identify their own "burnout states" and the associated conditions which have given rise to the reaction. Only then can they expect to develop appropriate and effective interventions to alleviate their stress. It should be noted that school psychologists who have had personal therapy experiences may be at an advantage as a result of increased levels of self-awareness and self-acceptance.

In addition to intrapersonal strategies, interpersonal and organizational strategies are often necessary depending upon the specific etiological factors in any given case. Perhaps the most useful recommendation at the interpersonal level involves the creation of support groups for school psychologists. As noted previously, support from others at various levels of the organization is critical in coping with burnout. For the rural school psychologist, this probably necessitates the formation of groups both within and outside the local system. One strategy, which is often recommended to increase resources in rural settings, but which can also serve as a buffer against burnout, is networking. For example, Hughes and Clark [16] described interagency councils in which professionals from a variety of human service agencies come together around a common service delivery purpose (e.g.,

developmental disabilities, child abuse). Such groups can provide a valuable source of support among related professionals who share similar interests. Participation in state and national organizations (including rural special interest groups) can also provide the opportunity to share concerns and develop a support network.

Organizational strategies are also often needed. Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch [28] cautioned that interventions at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels only produce first order changes (i.e., changes in a practitioners perceptions and/or feelings), while many circumstances require second order change (i.e., actual systems operation changes). Organizational change possibilities are also numerous and have been elaborated elsewhere [1; 4; 22]. Some examples of organizational change include incorporating staff development activities into a service delivery program [2], using paraprofessionals as resources [20], and providing rural-focused university preservice and inservice training programs [8; 16; 20]. As noted previously, great diversity exists among rural settings. Thus, so does the need for, and nature of, interventions which will be effective in a given setting. What is perhaps important to emphasize here is that school psychologists should consider organizational factors when assessing the antecedents of their burnout. Rural school psychologists should not be quick to assume that their problems are solely a result of personal "defects" or incompetence. Rather, they should consider the impact of organizational variables as well. As stressed above numerous conditions exist in many rural settings which can create or exacerbate problems of burnout among competent school psychologists.

Following the assessment of organizational factors, rural practitioners would be well-advised to engage in systematic problem-solving activities in an effort to increase the likelihood of successful intervention. As is the case with all interventions, the development of carefully planned and monitored strategies is essential to production and maintenance of change effects [1].

Concluding Comment

Burnout is a problem in rural settings which can have serious consequences for practitioners and recipients of services alike. While this paper has speculated on possible antecedents and coping strategies related to the experience of burnout in rural settings, systematic research is needed to investigate the scope and nature of burnout among school psychologists. Empirical data are essential to increase our understanding of the antecedents and consequences of burnout among school psychologists in all settings as well as rural school settings. Such research would provide the knowledge base to enable school psychologists to offer improved services to rural schools as well as enhance their personal and professional lives.

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