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Work-Life Balance Issues: A Qualitative Analysis of Counselor Educators

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Abstract

Considering professional trends and expectations in academia, the role of a counselor education faculty member is changing. It is important for researchers to explore how counselor educators manage workplace responsibilities in addition to managing personal/familial obligations. This phenomenological study analyzed the electronic reflections of 27 counselor educators regarding their experience with work-life balance (WLB). For this study, WLB is conceptualized as the management of professional and personal responsibilities simultaneously. How counselor educators define, obtain, and maintain WLB was of particular interest. Participants described their roles as educators, defined WLB, and provided strategies for obtaining and maintaining WLB. The themes and subthemes gleaned from this study are important for higher education, WLB and wellness research studies.

Keywords: work-life balance, counselor education, wellness

The pressure of securing and maintaining employment in the United States is ever changing. Throughout the 21st century, the composition of the modern workweek has changed with the advent of increasing work hours, decreased workplace autonomy, and increased technological advancements (Bonebright, Clay, & Ankenmann, 2013; Duxbury & Higgins, 2005; Roehling, Hernandez Jarvis, & Swope, 2005; Slan-Jerusalim & Chen, 2009). This change in workplace expectations has also impacted academia as faculty experience increasing expectations related to productivity, limitations associated with fiscal spending, and challenges with managing technology (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013;

Haynes, Bulosan, Citty, Grant-Harris, Hudson, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2012). This strain may especially be noted in junior faculty who have reported feeling overwhelmed in managing the multiple responsibilities associated with a career in academia (Austin, 2002). In a qualitative study of male junior faculty, one respondent stated, “the workday never finishes. I do a lot of work at home in the evening. Computers have made things much more complicated... not only do you have to be reading and trying to get writing done, but there is a constant stream of emails that you need to deal with,” (Reddick, Rochlen, Grasso Reilly, & Spikes, 2012, p. 5). Balancing the multiple responsibilities associated with academia can be challenging, time consuming, and may require adjusting to workforce trends.

These changes in the workplace have extended to counselor educators who reported challenges as they manage multiple professional identities, including clinician and professor (Matheson & Rosen, 2012). In fact, many counselor educators balance multiple professional roles including educator, counselor, supervisor, researcher, and advocate. According to Matheson and Rosen (2012), who studied marriage and family counselors, stress is problematic and leads to physical, emotional, and mental strain. Stress can lead to feelings of unbalance as professionals struggle to manage work and personal responsibilities (Burke & Nelson, 1998).

The concept of Work-Life Balance (WLB) has been described in the professional literature as each individual’s search to obtain meaning and satisfaction across the multiple roles/responsibilities in their life (Evans, Carney, & Wilkinson, 2013; Greenhaus, Collins & Shaw, 2003). WLB extends beyond balancing family and work responsibilities and can include friendships, partnerships, meaningful activities, and leisure activities (Evans et al., 2013; Philipsen, 2010). Fisher (2001) described WLB as an “occupational stressor” leading to problems associated with time management, motivation, ability to complete goals efficiently, and fatigue. In 2002, Frone defined WLB as “a lack of conflict or interference between work and family roles” (p. 145). Despite the specific definition, WLB is a complicated process that requires a consistent renegotiation between work expectations and personal responsibilities. Although an individual may report balance, this can quickly change when unforeseeable circumstances (e.g., an upcoming deadline at work, a family illness, workplace conflict) arise.

There is evidence to suggest that WLB discussions became prominent as gender-specific dynamics shifted in the workplace with the increase of dual-earner families (Duxbury & Higgins, 2005; Higgins, Duxbury, & Lyons 2010; Mason & Goulden, 2002; Matheson & Rosen, 2012; Trepal & Stinchfield, 2012). Although workplace changes may be experienced differently by professional men and women (Mason & Goulden, 2002), there is some agreement that with the advent of dual-earner families there are reported shifts in parental, household and partner responsibilities (Higgins et al., 2010). Trepal and Stinchfield (2012) found in their study of counselor educator mothers that there was an “ongoing struggle to ‘finding balance’ between personal and professional obligations and noted obligations children of different ages present and how this affected professional work life,” (p. 114). Armenti (2004) reported that faculty with children struggled to identify childcare that supported their nontraditional work schedules and single parent faculty members experienced unique challenges associated with balancing personal and

professional obligations. There is evidence to believe that WLB issues need to be studied to encourage professional success, personal satisfaction, and individual wellness.

Based on changing workforce expectations and evolving life responsibilities, it is imperative that researchers examine WLB. Although there is some literature available that addresses WLB from a global and broad perspective, there is limited research available that addresses WLB for specific professional populations (Matheson & Rosen, 2012). This study attempted to address the paucity in the literature on counselor educators and WLB. As previously noted, counselor educators are a unique population in that they are constantly negotiating between balancing professional identities such as clinicians and teachers. Job responsibilities for these two identities might include administrative, teaching, supervision, research, and clinical roles. While attempting to balance these responsibilities, counselor educators are also aware of self-care/wellness initiatives and may struggle to balance personal responsibilities including family, friends, and leisure activities (Trepal & Stinchfield, 2012). In consideration of these factors, we used a descriptive approach to examine the collective and individual experiences of counselor educators in defining and obtaining work-life balance.

This study was designed to examine the perceptions of counselor educators regarding WLB, including how the participants define and obtain WLB. We were especially interested in WLB as there is not a consistent definition available for counselor educators or the counseling profession. The purpose of this study was to initiate a dialogue on WLB in counselor education and to explore how professionals obtain and balance personal and professional responsibilities. The research questions for this study were: 1) How do counselor educators describe their experiences as counselor educators?; 2) How do counselor educators define WLB as it relates to counselor education?; and 3) How do counselor educators balance work and life responsibilities?

Method

The intent of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of counselor educators regarding WLB and to identify themes in obtaining WLB. The primary purpose of phenomenological research is to describe the meaning of experience by collecting individual narratives to analyze common elements (Creswell, 2006 Hays & Wood, 2011; McLeod, 2011). By carefully analyzing the data, researchers can identify the experience, which includes description and process (Creswell, 2007). There are two main types of phenomenological research that focus on developing a better understanding of lived experiences: 1) hermeneutical and 2) psychological (Creswell, 2007). Although these approaches are similar in outcome, how they analyze the data is different. This study used the psychological approach, which attempts to decrease the impact of researcher bias through bracketing approaches that allow the data to be analyzed from an open-minded perspective (Moustakas, 1994). The psychological approach allows the researchers to describe the data as it presents itself thematically so that a framework can be identified to acknowledge a context for which the information was provided.

Role of the Researchers

The research lens that was brought to the current study was that all three researchers are mothers and counselor educators who were experiencing work-life

balance issues. The first author was a tenure-track assistant professor preparing for her third year review and was pregnant. The second author, a counselor education student, was a second year doctoral student with two elementary age children. The third author was a full professor with two teenage children. In a meeting with the first and second authors, a discussion occurred regarding managing work life balance issues. From there, the discussion continued and the third author was consulted and a study was developed. As three women who are all presently managing work-life balance issues, we felt closely connected to the research content, so the identified themes were informally presented to a outside researcher. Researcher bias noted in this study was the challenge of balancing work and life as an academic, as noted in the literature (Comer, 2009). To account for researcher bias, bracketing techniques were employed so that certain participant responses were not favored during data interpretation and to ensure that responses were interpreted independent of researcher experiences (Hays & Wood, 2011; Wertz, 2005). Also, to account for biases, the researchers did not have a relationship with the participants, as we conducted a purposive sampling using online media resources.

Interview Questions

The researchers collected demographic information and posted one primary and two stimulus questions on a secure online program. Demographic questions requested information on the participant's race, partner status, parenthood status, whether the participant is tenured, academic appointment, and whether the counseling program they are associated with is CACREP accredited. The primary research question was, describe your experiences as a counselor educator. The stimulus questions were: 1) how do you define work-life balance; 2) how do you personally balance work and life; and 3) what challenges have you experienced in obtaining and maintaining work-life balance?

Participants

There were a total of 27 participants in this qualitative study. Participants described their race as White ($n = 20$, 74%), African American ($n = 5$, 17%), Latino/Hispanic ($n = 1$, 3%), and Multiracial ($n = 1$, 3%). Participants described their partnership status as single ($n=5$, 17%), married ($n=19$, 70%), partnered ($n = 2$, 7%), and divorced ($n=1$, 3%). Regarding children, of the participants polled, 8 subjects stated that they do not have children (31%), 6 reported having one child (23%), 8 reported having two children (31%), 2 reported having three children (8%), and 2 reported having four or more children (8%). Participants described their academic appointments as 22 (81%) instructor/professor, 4 (15%) adjunct faculty, and 1 (4%) administrator. Academic rank was identified by participants as 5 (21%) full professor, 8 (33%) associate professor, 8 (33%) assistant professor, and 3 (13%) non-tenure track instructor. Twenty-four (92%) of respondents indicated that they were employed at a CACREP-accredited institution.

For this study, counselor educators were identified through a targeted online mailing which included randomly selecting counselor education program faculty using the CACREP Web site. After potential participants were randomly selected, they were contacted via e-mail requesting their participation in an online study. Included in the e-mail was a link to Qualtrics, which hosted the informed consent document and qualitative research questions. Of the 278 counselor education faculty who were invited to participate, 27 (10%) agreed to participate by responding to five open-ended questions to

create an electronic reflection. The electronic responses were analyzed by the researchers to identify themes and sub-themes related to defining and obtaining WLB.

Data Analysis

Focusing on the process questions, a bracketing technique was employed to assist in this study's data analysis by providing a context to identify repetition and provide structure (Hays & Wood, 2011). The researchers in this study bracketed their experiences, identified repetitive statements, grouped meaning statements, and sought multiple realities (Moustakas, 1994). In an effort to suspend infusing judgments into the data interpretation, the researchers utilized journaling techniques to ensure the division of personal experiences with data interpretation. Transcripts were reviewed three times. For the first review, the researchers read each response closely in an effort to understand the respondents' statements (Wertz, 2005). During the second reading, prominent statements were underlined, and during the third reading, themes or categories were identified. Following Wertz's (2005) recommendations, the original themes identified in the data were discussed and relationships were identified. Ultimately the goal of data interpretation was to "integrate these meanings into a single exhaustive description of the phenomenon," (McLeod, 2011, p. 89).

A Duquesne approach was utilized to interpret the data for this research study. The Duquesne approach is a qualitative analysis method developed in the 1960's that was spearheaded by Amadeo Giorgi (McLeod, 2011). Through analyzing electronic reflection responses to process questions, emerging themes and categories were identified. The researchers immersed themselves into the data and were conscientious of horizontality (McLeod, 2011). "The researcher attunes himself or herself particularly to the meaning of objects and events as they are lived by the subject," (McLeod, 2011, p. 90). After immersing and analyzing the data over time, the following themes were noted.

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Findings

There were three themes: 1) role identification, 2) balance, and 3) priorities and three subthemes: 1) achievement, 2) self-acceptance, and 3) unbalance, identified through the analysis of electronic reflections collected from counselor educators. These themes and subthemes are described in detail below.

Experiences as a Counselor Educator

There were 26 transcripts available to analyze regarding participant descriptions of their experiences as counselor educators. Through the analysis of transcripts, the theme of role identification was acknowledged, and a majority of participants described their

experiences as counselor educators by describing the roles they embody. Participants described these roles as both stressful and enjoyable.

Role Identification. Participants noted that the professional roles they identified as counselor educators were important in their description of their experiences as counselor educators (n=26, 100%). We conceptualized this role identification as the multiple positions embodied as one functions as a counselor educator and the referral to one's professional identity. Roles identified by participants included teacher (n=12, 67%), administrator (n=6, 33%), researcher (n=4, 22%), supervisor (n=2, 11%) clinician (n=2, 11%) and leader/advocate (n=2, 11%). For these participants, their experience managing these multiple roles was generally rewarding and meaningful. One participant shared,

Excellent! I love working with the students, developing their skills, seeing how much they grow over the period in which they matriculate. It's hard work, but the sense of meaning in purpose one gets from seeing the next wave of clinicians entering the field is worth it!

From an alternative perspective, several respondents referred to role overload (n=7, 27%), especially related to increasing administrative responsibilities. One participant purported, "My 9 years as a chair & coordinator – life was not balanced. I love my work teaching students and supervising. I became burnt out with all the administrative responsibilities at a small, private institution."

Definition of WLB

Counselor educators (n=27, 100%) used descriptions such as achievement (22%), balance (74%), and acceptance to define WLB. Further descriptions are provided below.

Balance. Twenty participants (74%) defined WLB using terminology including balance (n=6, 30%), flexibility (n=1, 5%), prioritizing (n=1, 5%), competency (n=1, 5%), work stress (n=1, 5%), making time (n=1, 5%), compromising and having a work life that doesn't dominate health and personal time (n=1, 5%). One respondent stated,

A weekly struggle to prioritize my personal and family needs with work needs. A process of seeking out support systems in my life to ensure that I continue to strive for this, model this to doctoral students. I continue to re-assess who and what is important to me. Learn to accept the shifts in these re-assessments as they come along.

Another respondent said,

Ability to balance work demands with life demands. To some degree, I work so that I may have a fulfilling life outside of work, but it never seems to work out that way. I seem to spend more of my "life" time preparing for work and working.

Achievement. Six participants noted that achievement (22%) was an important theme when defining WLB for counselor educators. In examining this description, terms such as *successful*, *satisfied*, and *furthering one's career* were used by participants in defining WLB. Often, the respondents discussed WLB and achievement as it related exclusively to their professional careers. One participant defined WLB as,

A conscious effort to devote the proper time and effort for the roles for which I am being paid to work. It means that I make choices that allow me to be an excellent teacher, and excellent scholar, and a dedicated citizen to the university and the profession.

Self-Acceptance. Eleven participants (40%) noted that self-acceptance was included in defining WLB. The term self-acceptance was used as an umbrella term to include responses like *self-care, wellness, accepting the shifts, fulfilling life outside of work, and feeling complete*. One participant stated,

As a full-time professor, I have the flexibility to have a personal life. I can do things that are really important for my self-care (self-growth, continuing education, gym, spiritual growth, cooking, home care, available to my family, and helping my teen child). I also have time to work part-time as an independent therapist, which assists in my being a better, more current counselor educator.

Another participant reported,

The ability to breath during the day, at the end of the day, and at the end of the week. The ability to feel whole and complete while I work. The ability to be connected with friends and family, while also doing a satisfactory job at work.

How Do Counselor Educators Personally Balance Work and Life

In responding to how the participants personally balanced work and life, the following themes were identified through the analysis of electronic reflections.

Priorities. Eighty-nine percent of participants reported that they set priorities to obtain WLB. There was a diversity in responses from participants in achieving WLB. Some participants reported scheduling time to spend with friends/family while others mentioned they chose not to have children so that they could prioritize their careers. Participants also reported setting boundaries, limiting professional work at home, and identifying meaningful leisure activities. One participant noted,

I prioritize my health (physical and psychological) and my family first. I can provide 100% effort to my job most days, but on days when I need to take care of myself or my daughter, I live with a reduced effort at work. I have learned that I can almost always make up for partial effort at work. There are many things I can do to give back to students and colleagues to make up for staying at home with a sick child, or choosing to work from home when I have a fever. I cannot adequately make up for a significant reduced effort to my partner and daughter if I do this consistently. And I have not figured out how to make it up to myself when I prioritize myself as low. I usually pay a high price that negatively impacts others, such as lack of sleep, getting sick, feeling resentful, etc.

Unbalanced. Thirty-seven percent of participants reported that they did not currently experience WLB or that they did not manage the balance of their professional and personal roles successfully. When referring to unbalance, participants addressed their excessive work responsibilities and not successfully prioritizing personal responsibilities. One participant stated,

Not well! A lot of childcare obligations have fallen on my husband and family members. When I am able to be available, I am often tired. I simply try not to displace anger on my family and take vacations when possible.

Another participant reported, “Obviously right now, I don’t balance them well. I did BEFORE getting in to this profession, however, I miss that kind of sanity.”

These responses provide valuable feedback to the concept of WLB for counselor educators. In considering this information, it appears that counselor educators might identify through the implementation of multiple professional identities (teacher, researcher, etc.) and that this role overload can be stressful. In addition, counselor educators defined WLB as a sense of achievement, balance, and self-acceptance. Finally, counselor educators reported that the identification of priorities is useful, although a percentage reported continued feelings of unbalance. This data is timely and relevant to the counseling profession as it provides valuable feedback to the current experiences of counselor educators.

Discussion

This study sought to investigate the experiences of WLB with counselor educators. Through the analysis of electronic reflections, it was determined that counselor educators perceive WLB to be a complex issue. Faculty members may struggle with managing family responsibilities with work obligations and this may be especially relevant to junior faculty (Reddick et al., 2012). Although family-friendly policies are implemented to help WLB issues, these policies are often institutional in nature and do not meet the unique needs of individual workers (Miller & Hollenshead, 2005). As previously noted, counselor educators are in a unique professional position as they identify with multiple roles including educator, supervisor, clinician, and researcher. These roles added to personal responsibilities can be stressful and overwhelming.

Counselor educators define WLB consistent with the professional literature in that WLB is a balance of work and personal responsibilities in an attempt to achieve satisfaction (Evans et al., 2013; Greenhaus et al., 2003). Noted by achievement and wellness, WLB in counselor education is a negotiation of professional and personal responsibilities. How this is achieved by faculty is more cumbersome as respondents noted either not achieving WLB or by using techniques such as prioritizing in an attempt to manage work and personal responsibilities.

Although this information represents a small sample of counselor educators, the challenges of balancing faculty expectations with familial obligations is well documented (Armenti, 2004; Matheson & Rosen, 2012; Reddick et al., 2012; Trepal & Stinchfield, 2012). Research is scant on addressing or improving WLB across academia and counselor education. Wellness and self-care are often emphasized in training programs and continuing education; however, this topic is often not discussed regarding counselor educators and in academia. It is imperative that the counseling profession examines WLB issues to promote faculty wellness and quality education services.

Limitations

This study examined the experiences of WLB for counselor educators. While the findings from this study provided relevant information, it is important to note that this information may not be generalizable to a larger sample of counselor education faculty. While there was some diversity noted among the sample group regarding race, partnership status, number of children, and professional status, the lack of gender identification is a weakness of this study. In addition, participant responses were grouped together based on comparison, and since this topic of WLB is so very complex, this simple set of indicators may not provide the reader with a rich understanding of this topic. It is recommended that additional studies examine WLB as it relates to the counseling profession, from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives.

Implications for Counselor Education and Supervision

The findings from this study might have multiple implications for the counselor education profession and career development professionals. First, counselor education faculty may want to consider how this data impacts their career/familial trajectories. Educators may need to consider their role as models and how WLB issues influence their mentoring and educating philosophies (Matheson & Rosen, 2012). Counselor educators may want to consider training opportunities for their counseling students to initiate dialogue on WLB to promote self-care and wellness practices (Lawson & Myers, 2011).

Slan-Jerusalim and Chen (2009) postulated that policies that promote family balance are developed for global organizational compliance; however, they often do not meet the individual needs of the employee. With this in mind, counselor educators may want to consider advocating for WLB at the classroom, program, and department levels that address individual needs. Although the academy is a large institution that employs a high number of educators, counselor educators can promote WLB by encouraging and supporting one another. As noted by Meyer and Ponton (2006), counselors are able to balance their professional identities through continued and consistent healthy behaviors.

Finally, counselor educators should engage in continued discussion regarding WLB at an individual/personal level. It is imperative that counselor educators begin to identify realistic and obtainable methods to achieve WLB. Although the workforce continues to transform and evolve, the counseling profession must encourage self-compassion in order to promote healthy, balanced and satisfied professionals.

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