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## The Professional Peer Membership of School Counselors and the Resources Used Within Their Decision-Making

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# The Professional Peer Membership of School Counselors and the Resources Used Within Their Decision-Making

## Abstract

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe the demographic identity of a national sample of professional school counselors who were members of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), understand the manner in which they conceptualized their professional peer membership, and explore what sources they use to make professional and ethical decisions. Consistent with previous research, the majority of participants were white woman, across all four regions in the sample; however, when compared to previous studies, there were a slightly higher percentage of non-white school counselors. Results suggest that there is still a significant gap between the demographics of school counselors and the students they serve. The results of this study indicate that professional school counselors hold a wide range of opinions concerning who they view are their professional peers. There were also significant differences on what resources participants' used to make professional and ethical decisions. Implications and future directions for research are discussed.

## Keywords

School Counseling, ASCA, Ethical Decision Making, Professional Peers

Professional organizations, accreditation bodies, and counseling scholars agree that fostering a strong professional identity is important for the self-efficacy, competency, and the ongoing development of individual counselors, as well as the overall counseling profession (Luke & Goodrich, 2010; Murdock, Stipanovic & Lucas, 2013; Myers, Sweeney, & White, 2002). The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards have outlined professional identity as one of eight foci of educational experience and training (2016). The American School Counseling Association (ASCA; 2012) underscored this in their National Model for school counseling programming that guides school counselor professional practice, a framework that has subsequently been found to support professional identity and clarify role inconsistency (Shillinford & Lambie, 2010).

The extant literature related to professional identity development in counselors has increased in the last decade (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010; Luke & Gordon, 2012; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003), specifically related to how the professional identity of school counselors is both impacted and enacted (Gordon & Luke, 2012; Luke & Gordon, 2011). Although scholars have called for the enhancement of the professional identity development of counselors (e.g., Gale & Austin, 2003), there remains uncertainty about how to operationalize and assess professional identity, as well as how to understand professional identity within specific systemic contexts (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003) or ‘communities of practice’ (Woodside, Ziegler, & Paulus, 2009). Defining community of practice and professional peer group membership is more complicated in the area of school counseling because school counselors are professional counselors, but also part of the educational team. Further, in many states school counselors are certified as teachers with a specialty area of school counseling. The purpose of the current study is to explore the current demographics of a national sample of

ASCA members, to understand how practicing school counselors describe their professional peer group affiliation in relation to their professional identity, and what sources and resources they use to make professional and ethical decisions.

### **School Counselors' Professional Identity**

In a seminal grounded theory study exploring the professional identity of 10 school counselors in the United States (U.S.) and the Caribbean, Brott and Myers (1999) described professional identity as the manifestation of a professional's self-concept in relation to a certain profession, such that this self-concept "serves as a frame of reference from which one carries out a professional role, makes significant professional decisions, and develops as a professional" (p. 339). More concrete behavioral indicators of professional identity have been advanced to include active professional organization membership and engagement in ongoing professional development (Wester & Lewis, 2005), as well as self-identifying as a professional, integrating professional skills and attitudes, and engaging in one's professional community (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010; Gordon & Luke, 2012). While lacking conclusive empirical support, this body of research suggests a relationship between how counselors conceptualizes their role and their professional peer group, and how this self-conceptualization might be related to the types of resources they access as they make professional and ethical decisions.

Goodrich, Hrovat, and Luke (2014) explored the professional identity, practice, and development of Kenyan Teacher-Counselors, the equivalent to professional school counselors in the U.S. Participants in the study noted the strengths and challenges of teacher-counselors in the Kenyan educational system, including the lack of a strong professional identity and community of related professionals to help serve professional identity formation of this group. Context and

community of likeminded professionals appeared to be important in this study to the development and ongoing growth of one's professional identity.

Wenger (1998) described one's membership within a professional community as joining a community of practice. He defined work engagement tasks that are necessary to transition into full membership within that community. Woodside, Ziegler, and Paulus (2009) applied the communities of practice research of Wenger (1998) to a study exploring 52 messages exchanged between five female school counseling interns over a 2-week period. The findings indicated that school counseling interns perceived numerous barriers in fulfilling work engagement tasks including: (a) a participant's "ability to interact with other members of the community"; (b) their development of "a shared repertoire of resources for negotiating meaning," including words, concepts, and ways of doing things; and (c) a sense of "accountability to the joint enterprise of the practice" (Woodside et al., 2009, pp. 21–22).

Fulfilling the above work engagement tasks appeared influential to these interns' success in their roles, as well as the long term development of their professional identity. Within this study, interns turned to persons identified as their peers to make sense of their experiences, which then influenced how they went about doing their work. Understanding the experiences of interns is significant because school counseling students' internship experiences are key components in professional identity formation and future practice as school counselors. Further, it raises questions about how professional school counselors experience their role in the context of public PK-12 education, and how their peer group affiliation might later influence their professional behaviors within the school environment.

## **Demographic Composition of School Counselors**

There are currently no comprehensive national data about the sex/gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion, educational training, region, or grade level of current practice of professional school counselors. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) membership, though substantial, is an understood fraction of practicing school counselors nationwide. Although ASCA permits purchase of portions of their membership list, they do not provide detailed demographic information about members (S. Wicks, personal communication, April 3, 2014). Therefore, researchers are challenged to determine the representativeness of their school counselor participant sample with respect to the above demographic variables (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). This is potentially problematic, as the literature suggested that school counselor demographics may influence professional identity development (Costello, 2005). To date, we are unaware of any national studies conducted with a specific aim to better understand the interaction between demographic and professional peer group membership.

## **Research Questions**

The present study was designed to explore the demographic and professional peer group membership of school counselors, and to determine what resources they used to help resolve professional and ethical dilemmas. The first research question sought to descriptively identify the demographic identity of professional school counselors who are also members of ASCA. Specifically, the study sought to identify members' sex/gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion, educational training, and region of current practice and their professional identity as reflected in their description who they viewed as their peers. The second research question explored the resources used by school counselors when making professional and ethical decisions in response to a specific case study. These questions were explored to gain a better understanding of how

school counselors' demographic and counselor preparation variables influenced the decisions they made at work, as well as understand how resources, such as supervision and consultation, might be utilized by school counselors based upon their perceived community of practice.

## **Methods**

### **Procedures**

After receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval for the study, the research team formatted the survey instrument and demographic questionnaire into Qualtrics, an on-line based survey instrument provided by the primary researcher's institution. Using a membership list for ASCA, the research team sent an email to all members of ASCA, which included a link to the Qualtrics survey along with instructions about the survey, and a brief discussion of its purpose. Following survey consent, participants were asked to read a case study and then directed to complete a survey, which included demographic questions, questions about their professional peer group membership, and questions about the resources they used to make ethical decisions. Two weeks following the date of the initial email contact, persons who had not previously responded to the study were sent email reminders with a link to the survey so that they could complete the project. A final reminder was sent to non-responders four weeks following the initial survey email.

A total of 23,440 persons were initially contacted nationwide. Of those 23,440 emails, a total of 2,418 email addresses were found to be invalid. An additional 237 persons responded to the researchers to share that they had received the survey, but would or could not participate in the study. The final potential sample for our study was 20,785, of that group a total of 1463 persons (7%) entered the survey and provided partial data. Of those respondents, 884 provided complete data for the final study (60% of responders, 4.3% of potential survey sample).

## **Instrumentation**

**Demographic information.** Questions included information about participant's socio-cultural identities (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious identity) and geographic region in which they resided. In addition, participants were asked about their education, years of experience in schools and as school counselors, and the accreditation status of the program from which they graduated

**Professional Resource Scoring Instrument.** Participants were first asked who they viewed as their professional peers (e.g., school counselors in their building, district, or state; national school counselors; members of ASCA; other educational professionals). Participants were then provided a list of potential resources they may access to make professional decisions including: conferring with principal or district office administrators; asking their supervisor; seeking professional consultation from trusted peers outside of the education setting; consulting ethical codes developed by professional organizations (e.g., American Counseling Association (ACA) and ASCA); a community resource related to the diversity characteristic of student (i.e. an LGBT resource center); exploring district policies and precedents; past legal decisions; seeking spiritual advice or praying about it when related to a moral dilemma. Participants used a Likert scale to provide an individualized score for the utility of each of these potential resources. The professional resource item was created after reviewing other ethical decision making scoring instruments (e.g., the Intercultural Model of Ethical Decision Making [IMED]; Luke, Goodrich, & Gilbride, 2013b). The scoring instrument underwent multiple rounds of review, and the items were piloted with experts in ethical decision making (Luke, Goodrich, & Gilbride, 2013a) and tested with masters' students (Luke, Goodrich, & Gilbride, 2013b). Participants were provided a list of potential resources and asked to rate the likelihood that she/he would use

that resource on a scale from 0 (not at all likely) to 10 (very likely). Results of those pilot studies found support for the instrument. Previous research into the IMED Scoring instrument found inter-rater reliability for the instrument at 0.89 (Luke, Goodrich, & Gilbride, 2013a).

## **Results**

### **Participants**

Eight hundred and ninety-seven ASCA members consented to fully participate in the study. Of these participants, 750 (84%) identified as female, 139 (15%) identified as male; three participants identified as transgender, and five participants refused to disclose their gender identity. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 72, with a mean age of 42.45 (S.D. = 11.98). In terms of ethnic identity, 835 respondents (93%) identified as non-Hispanic/Latino, while 49 (5%) identified as Hispanic/Latino; 13 participants did not answer this question (2%). When asked about race, 764 participants (85%) identified themselves as White/Caucasian, 89 (10%) as Black or African American, 11 (1%) as Asian, 11 (1%) as American Indian/Native American, and 4 as Hawaiian/Pacific Islander; 18 participants (2%) did not disclose their racial identity. As such, racial/ethnic information provided by participants appeared similar to prior school counseling demographic research.

The majority of respondents identified as heterosexual (839; 94%), with 15 respondents identifying as gay/lesbian (2%) and 14 respondents identifying as bisexual (2%); 28 persons refused to disclose their affectual identity. In terms of religious identification, the sample was very diverse. Two-hundred and seventy-three (31%) of participants identified as Protestant, 201 (23%) identified as Catholic, 25 (3%) respondents identified as Mormon/Latter Day Saints, 24 as Jewish (3%), 13 participants (1%) identified as Unitarian Universalist, and 2 identified as Buddhist (less than 1%). One hundred and twenty-five respondents (14%) identified as spiritual,

but not religious, 44 (5%) identified as Agnostic, and 19 identified as Atheist (2%). Finally, 65 participants (7%) identified as having no religious affiliation, and 98 participants (11%) identified as having another faith/religious tradition.

Regional distribution of respondents was fairly even across the U.S., with 238 (27%) from the East, 242 (27%) from the Midwest, 225 (25%) from the South, and 188 (21%) from the Western region. Respondents were primarily master's level clinicians, with 710 (80%) identifying this as their highest degree. One hundred and seventeen participants (13%) identified a certificate of advanced studies or education specialist as their highest degree, and 48 (5%) identified as having a doctorate; 17 participants disclosed having a bachelor's degree (2%) and five participants did not answer this question. The participants had, on average, 8.8 years of experience as a professional school counselor (minimum of less than one year, maximum of 39 years).

Six hundred and one participants (67%) of the responding sample stated that their masters' degree program was accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). One-hundred and fifty-nine participants (17.7% of the sample) stated that their masters' program was not accredited. One hundred and thirty-seven (15.3%) respondents did not disclose the accreditation status of their masters' level institution.

### **Professional Peer Group Data**

Eight hundred and eighty-four of the respondents to this survey completed questions related to whom they perceived as their professional peers. Of those respondents, 346 (about 39% of participants) identified school counselors in their local region (e.g., building [40], district [193], or state [113]) as their peer group. As such, their sense of affiliation appeared to be more influenced by common contexts of work within the larger professional field of school

counseling. Two hundred and eighty-eight (32%) of the responding school counselors identified with a national focused school counseling peer group. Of that group, 216 respondents identified that they viewed school counselors nationwide as their peer group (24%) and seventy-two respondents identified school counselors who are members of ASCA as their peers (8%). Twenty-eight percent of the sample identified their peers not as school counselors, but other educational professionals in their school.

### **Ethical Decision Making Resources**

To answer the second research question participants were asked what resources they used when making ethical decisions. Respondents were asked to rate the possibility of their using different resources on a ten point scale, with zero representing that they would not utilize this resource, and ten representing that they were likely to utilize the resource. The five highest rated resources that participants stated they would use to address an ethical dilemma were: (1) administrative policies ( $M = 8.39$ ,  $S.D. = 2.1$ ); (2) ACA/ASCA Code of Ethics ( $M = 7.96$ ,  $S.D. = 2.5$ ); (3) Consulting a colleague or professor ( $M = 7.86$ ,  $S.D. = 2.4$ ); calling the ACA Ethics Consultant ( $M = 6.39$ ,  $S.D. = 3.1$ ); and (5) past legal decisions ( $M = 6.37$ ,  $S.D. = 3.0$ ).

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, we wanted to describe the demographic identity of a large national sample of professional school counselors who were also members of ASCA. Second, we wanted to explore the manner in which practicing school counselors conceptualized their professional peer group membership and what sources they use as they make professional and ethical decisions. The demographic results of this study were consistent with previous research in that we found that the majority of our participants identified as White women. This trend was consistent across all four regions. Compared to prior studies (Bodenhorn

et al, 2010; Holcomb-McCoy, 2005; Owens et al., 2010), a slightly higher percentage of non-White school counselors completed the current study. Because of the paucity of demographic data available in the literature, it is impossible to determine if this result is due to an increase in the diversity among school counselors or merely due to participant response. The results do suggest however, that there is still a significant gap between the demographics of school counselors and the students they serve.

Current results indicate that there is a wide range of views of professional school counselors related to whom they view as their peers. Not surprisingly the majority of participants viewed other school counselors, either in their building, district, state or country as their peers, but over a quarter viewed themselves first as educators. Interestingly, while all of the participants were members of ASCA, only 8% viewed other ASCA members as their peers; far fewer than those that identified with the profession in general either locally or nationwide. The results of this study suggest that ASCA does not define the professional peer group of these participants, even as they overwhelmingly identify as school counselors.

Given the range of groups identified by study participants as peers, it was a bit surprising that no differences were found in resources that participants identified using when trying to resolve complex or ethical dilemmas. There were also no differences between school counselors that had graduated from CACREP-accredited programs and those who had not; nor were any regional differences found. These results indicate that school counselors who identify as educators are just as likely as school counselors who identify with the school counseling profession to turn to the ACA or ASCA ethical codes to solve ethical dilemmas. Not surprisingly, the most popular resource for all participants was administrative policies.

However, even school counselors who identified their peers as other educators, viewed ACA/ASCA ethical codes and the ACA ethics office as equally important resources.

One significant implication of these results is a commonality of practice that transcends peer reference group. Since all participants were members of ASCA, even though only 8% identified ASCA members as their primary peer group, they may be more influenced, and thus more similar, in the practice standards and expectations promulgated by ASCA than they realize. As such, it would be useful to conduct this study with school counselors that are not ASCA members to explore any potential differences that may exist.

These results suggest that there is a standard of practice shared by some ASCA members that includes the importance of national norms and resources embodied in the codes of ethics. In addition, the respondents to this study also saw the importance of professional consultation, either from a peer or through the ACA ethics consultant, as important resources when faced with ethical decisions. Not surprisingly, administrative policies and past legal decisions all appeared to highly influence the participants within the study. Hence, it seems that being embedded in school systems and administrative functions appeared to motivate respondents' response to potential ethical dilemmas. This could help to explain the very local nature of the peer group endorsed by many of the participants. Future research with non-ASCA member school counselors could explore whether particularly they also consult school and district level policy with the same frequency.

## **Implications**

It is striking that in this study of ASCA members only eight percent of respondents identified other national members of ASCA as members as their peer group, in spite of the fact that 24% of respondents identified other national school counselors (in general) as professional peers. The question remains why the other 68% of respondents did not appear to be nationally focused in their professional peer group identification. It could be that the ongoing fractions within the field of professional counseling (e.g., Reiner, Dobmeier, & Hernandez, 2013) can be seen through the responses of the participants in this study, who identified more at the school or local level. As such, it appears necessary for ASCA, as well as the profession of counseling in general, to work to better reclaim the identity of professional counselors, and to instill the importance of a larger peer group and professional identity within each of their members.

It was encouraging that respondents saw the importance of consulting the ACA and ASCA ethical codes, as well as professional colleagues, when attempting to respond to ethical dilemmas. While it is certainly the case that school counselors need to operate within the law and district policies, ethical dilemmas often challenge current practice and school counselors are expected to respond to ethical dimension of a situation not merely based on the minimal legal standard. It appears that school counselors may be in need of additional ethical resources when facing these complex decisions, as ethical dilemmas can oftentimes be very abstract, and not easily answered with only legal and administrative policies. It is important to note that school counselors' ethical responsibility, while needing to be consistent with the law, can often require additional responsibilities.

## **School Counselor Preparation**

As there is an established link within the school counseling literature between exposure to specific topics and experiences in counselor training and subsequent attitudes and behaviors in practice (Chao, 2013; Scarborough & Luke, 2008), there are several potential implications for counselor educators and supervisors. First, school counselor education programs may benefit from an internal audit to assess when and how the curricula addresses professional identity and peer membership. Additionally, the audit can assess if extra-curricular opportunities, such as membership in Chi Sigma Iota or other counseling professional organizations (Luke & Goodrich, 2010) facilitate strong professional identity development among school counseling students. Role ambiguity and role conflict has also been implicated as barriers to school counselor professional identity (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Dodato, 2014). Hence, more training opportunities are needed to support some school counselors to successfully navigate this and become exemplary school counselor practitioners (Scarborough & Luke, 2008) and school counselor leaders (Dollarhide, Gibson, & Saginak, 2008) with strong professional peer group affiliation and identities.

Related, research in other school counseling domains has suggested that school counselor education programs may focus more on knowledge and awareness, and give less attention to the development of related skills over time (Jennings, 2014; Luke, Goodrich, & Scarborough, 2011). Given that the current research suggests resourcefulness in aspects of professional decision-making, programs may wish to implement specific opportunities for students to experientially engage in activities to develop and enact the behaviors and skills associated with professional identity (Luke & Goodrich, 2010). In addition, both group and individual supervisors have an obligation to identify opportunities to focus on and develop supervisees' professional peer group

membership as it relates to their counseling. Given the importance of modeling and feedback, trained school counseling supervisors (Swank & Tyson, 2012) can identify opportunities to work with school counselors-in-training on their ethical professional identity (Reichel, 2014), essential aspects of professional identity (Upton, 2013), and how role ambiguity and role conflict can interface with professional identity (Dodato, 2014).

### **School Counselor Practice**

Ongoing professional development can be an important mechanism for both clinical and professional identity growth (Luke et al., 2011). School counselor practitioners are encouraged to seek out school counseling specific opportunities locally, regionally, and nationally. While district level support for such training is encouraged (Burkard, Gillen, Martinez, & Skytte, 2012), school counselor practitioners can independently partner with counselor education programs for additional coursework and utilize the numerous online resources both in the form of traditional webinars, podcasts, trainings, and also the newer social media platforms such as the professional school counselor forums on Twitter, Google Hangout, Instagram (Luke, 2013).

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this study was the low response rate of ASCA members, with less than 5% of potential participants completing the survey. However, this response rate is consistent with other large on-line surveys of populations, and serves as one of largest national samples of school counselor demographics when compared to other published research. The responses from our participant population suggest that our sample was broadly representative. In addition, this study is one of only a few studies of school counselors that examined ethical behavior and membership characteristics of ASCA members. An additional limitation of this study is that it is descriptive in nature. Although the results of the study provide a more comprehensive picture of

the current membership of ASCA and their professional behaviors related to ethical situations, the descriptive nature of the study does not provide information about any causal conditions or predictive conditions that led participants to be members of professional organizations or behave in any given way when at work. As such, follow-up studies should look at more complex relationships in how ASCA members make professional decisions.

### **Conclusion**

There is broad agreement in the literature about the importance of school counselors' professional identity (Gibson et al., 2010; Luke & Gordon, 2011). However, there has been little agreement as to the markers or manifestations of professional identity (Costello, 2005; Wester & Lewis, 2005), such as one's identified peer group membership affiliation. While the relationship between school counselors' professional identity, peer group affiliation, and professional competence has been implied (Brott & Myers, 1999), this research begins to illuminate how school counselors' professional peer group affiliation is related to the ways in which they consult resources and references when making ethical decisions.

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