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Communication Conflict Styles, Perception of Ethical Environment, and Job Satisfaction Among College and University Counselors

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This quantitative study examined the perceptions of college and university counselors (N = 669) regarding their ethical environment, job satisfaction, and ways of dealing with organizational conflict. Findings indicated that counselors manifested an average, but not positive, perception of their ethical environment. Job satisfaction was highest among counselors employed at small institutions. While variable, communication conflict styles indicated possible power struggles occurring within counseling centers. Implications for campus-based counseling centers are discussed.

Keywords: college counselors, ethics, job satisfaction, communication conflict style

Mental health concerns among college students have grown at an increasing rate in the past 2 decades (Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, & Benton, 2003). For example, the number of student psychiatric hospitalizations reported nationally has tripled from 1994 to 2012 (Gallagher, 2012). In a national study of campus counseling center directors, 88% of participants stated that the recent increase in students seeking services as well as the increase in the severity of presenting issues has resulted in staffing concerns (Gallagher, 2012), leaving counseling centers poorly equipped and overwhelmed (Hodges, 2001).

Stressors on college and university counseling centers may affect the overall institutional mission, because the work of counseling centers and the provision of mental health services on campus have been shown to have a positive impact on student retention (Lee, Olson, Locke, Michelson, & Odes, 2009). Furthermore, college and university counseling centers are embedded within an institutional context of diminishing financial resources, shifting accountabilities, and intensifying scrutiny on the part of governing boards, policy makers, and the general public. This political as well as economic climate pressures administrators to demonstrate institutional accountability, organizational efficiency, and cost-effectiveness (Much, Wagener, & Hellenbrand, 2010).

Within this milieu, relations among administrators and campus-based mental health counselors are becoming increasingly complex (Flynn & Heitzmann, 2008). Research suggests that managerial priorities may contradict a counselor's

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values, such as availability of services, professional autonomy, confidentiality, and care (Ayers, 2009; Jodoin & Ayers, 2013). Where tensions arise between management priorities and counseling professional values, counselors may feel torn. As a consequence, counselors may experience loss of organizational commitment and lowered morale (Eells, Seals, Rockett, & Hayes, 2005), possibly motivating them to seek alternative employment (Ayers, 2009). Given the increasing severity of mental health concerns on college campuses, and the fact that counseling centers are ensconced within the institutional context, the purpose of this study was to understand how counselors (i.e., counselors, social workers, and psychologists) experience the ethical complexities and related professional environment of campus-based mental health centers, the ways counselors deal with organizational conflict, and the impact on job satisfaction. The findings may help us to understand the ethical intricacies of counseling in higher education settings (e.g., confidentiality concerns and issues regarding professional autonomy) and to develop policies accordingly. Also, the findings may identify barriers to collaborative communication and may help administrators encourage advocacy, constructive dialogue, and productive negotiation of ethical concerns.

Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this analysis was to explore relations among ethical environment, organizational communication conflict behaviors, and job satisfaction, taking into consideration institutional and individual-level variables. These variables and their relevance to the intent of the study are explained in the following sections.

Ethical Environment

Ethical challenges may present more acutely in certain institutional contexts. Public and private institutions depend on different revenue streams and are subject to different governance structures, for example. Furthermore, contemporary organizations tend to gravitate toward what are believed to be more efficient organizational structures. One effect on campus mental health centers is that they may be merged with student health centers. Our previous research indicates that such organizational arrangements may lead to ethical challenges, particularly in terms of client confidentiality (Jodoin & Ayers, 2013).

In addition to possible stressors related to organizational arrangements, traumatic events on campuses, such as the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings, have resulted in counseling staff having to rethink forms of communication with campus administrators (Flynn & Heitzmann, 2008). Although increased communication between counselors and administrators may be warranted, the conflict between the traditional roles of counseling centers and ethical considerations with new threats to campus has led counselors into uncharted

territory. Maintaining an ethical environment in light of institutional demands has been identified as a concern for counselors (Much et al., 2010).

Similarly, as resources become increasingly scarce, college and university leaders face pressures to seek alternative revenue streams. Services such as campus mental health may be viewed as an opportunity to recover costs by charging therapeutic fees. This managerial concern is based in considerable fiscal challenges. At the same time, however, it raises ethical questions regarding access. These are concerns that are often ethical priorities for clinical professionals (Ghetie, 2007).

In this study, an ethical environment is defined as an organizational setting in which ethical principles guide professional behavior (Corley, Minick, Elswick, & Jacobs, 2005). The first objective of this study was to provide a snapshot of the ethical environments at college and university mental health clinics in the United States. This exploration also took into account the organizational positioning of campus-based mental health centers, that is, whether the campus-based center was a stand-alone unit or merged with health services (Brown, Perez, & Reeder, 2007). Furthermore, we considered whether campus-based mental health centers charged students a fee for services. Thus, a second objective of this study was to explore how, if at all, different institutional characteristics relate to ethical environment for counselors.

Organizational Communication Conflict Behaviors

It is important to understand the prevalence, nature, and institutional contexts of ethical conflicts for campus-based mental health counselors, but just as important is the way in which these conflicts are managed. A few qualitative studies have addressed counselors' responses to organizational conflicts. Our previous research explored counselors' experiences with ethical challenges at eight colleges and universities, four public and four private (Jodoin & Ayers, 2013). Participants reported three sets of responses to conflicts between organizational expectations and professional norms. First, some counselors withdrew from the situation; they resigned from their positions and found clinical employment elsewhere. Second, some counselors accommodated supervisors' directives but believed their acquiescence resulted in a compromised standard of care. Third, some counselors reported creative resistance and efforts to change organizational expectations through educational and advocacy strategies; in these cases, counselors advocated for their clients but at times resorted to forms of subterfuge in order to offer the best care possible.

Findings related to counselors' experiences with organizational conflict directly parallel a line of scholarship in which organizational conflict is fundamentally a communicative event. In this research, individuals dealing with organizational conflict tend to rely on three general communication strategies: nonconfrontation, solution orientation, or control (Putnam & Wilson, 1982). First, nonconfrontation involves a passive approach to communication and includes behaviors such as withdrawal or avoidance. Second, solution orientation

includes assertive communication, compromise, or collaborative problem solving. Third, control is an aggressive style of communication whereby one forces a position and attempts to control another's behavior.

Putnam and Wilson (1982) pointed out that there is no universally appropriate strategy for managing conflict. Depending on the situation, any of the three general conflict management strategies may be appropriate. A counselor may believe it impossible to address ethical lapses within a rigid, authoritative climate. In such a case, nonconfrontation—for example, by seeking alternative employment—may be the most appropriate or healthiest choice. Similarly, control strategies may initially lead to desired outcomes, but a hostile work relationship may follow, which may ultimately compromise client care. On the other hand, counselors have reported successful negotiations, leading to acceptable practices and policies. Through advocacy, education, or diplomacy, these counselors were able to preserve quality of care and increase organizational commitment to ethical standards.

As stated earlier, one primary intent of this study was to explore the ethical environment at campus-based mental health centers. Because we hope our work will ultimately improve ethical environments, we focused the analysis on strategies counselors tend to use in dealing with ethical conflict. We also explored relations among these communication strategies and individual and institution-level variables. This was important because organizational communication conflict behaviors are not stable preferences but rather conscious choices based partially on contextual variables. Understanding the contextual variables associated with different conflict management strategies may lead to policies and practices that not only eliminate barriers to effective conflict communication but also promote diplomacy and productive negotiations.

Job Satisfaction

According to the extant literature, counselors who face ethical challenges are susceptible to low morale, burnout, and role strain (Eells et al., 2005; Jodoin & Ayers, 2013). Alternatively, in a survey of 133 American College Counseling Association members, Smith et al. (2007) found that "despite the challenges and pressures that college counselors may face, they generally enjoy their work" (p. 69). It is not clear, however, if communication conflict strategies mitigate these differing outcomes. It seems likely that counselors who are able to negotiate, educate, or advocate in ways that preserve ethical decision making will be more satisfied with their work setting. However, although successful negotiation may be an individual skill, it also may be contingent on institution-level variables. A third objective of this analysis was to explore relations among ethical environment, communication conflict behaviors, and job satisfaction. As demand for campus-based mental health services increases, clinical directors will need to retain clinical professionals in employment, and this will require an understanding of factors that relate to job satisfaction.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. What is the ethical environment for campus-based mental health counselors in the United States?
2. Does perception of ethical environment vary significantly by institution type (public, private nonreligious, private religious) and institution size (small, medium, large)?
3. How much of the variance in the three communication conflict styles (nonconfrontation, solution orientation, and control) is accounted for by ethical environment and job satisfaction?
4. Do conflict communication styles vary significantly by institution type, institution size, counseling center type (merged, nonmerged), fee-for-service schemes (fee charged for therapeutic sessions), and job duty (administrator, nonadministrator)?
5. Does job satisfaction vary significantly by institution type and institutional size?

Research Questions 1 and 2 deal with the ethical environment; Research Questions 3 and 4 relate to communication conflict strategies, and Research Question 5 is associated with job satisfaction. To answer the research questions, we pursued a cross-sectional descriptive design using random and cluster sampling techniques.

Method

Sampling and Participants

We distributed three survey instruments (described later) along with demographic questions to a random cluster sample of campus-based mental health counselors. Initially, we created a list of 1,639 institutions through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) winter 2010–2011, spring 2011, and fall 2011 enrollment component (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). IPEDS assigns each institution to one of eight regions, which served as our clusters. We randomly sampled 75% of the institutions within each region, resulting in 1,364 institutions. Institution types included associate's public 2-year colleges under 4-year universities, associate's public 4-year baccalaureate colleges, master's colleges and universities, research universities with high research activity, research universities with very high research activity, and doctoral/research universities. In terms of governance, institutions were categorized into public, private nonreligious, or private religious affiliated. Regarding institution size, definitions offered to participants were as follows: small (<2,500 students), medium (2,500–7,500 students), or large (>7,500 students; Gallagher, 2012).

We obtained counselors' e-mail addresses by searching the selected college and university websites. Graduate trainees were excluded from this study, as were counselors employed at the same institution as the authors. Not all e-mail addresses were available online, which constitutes one limitation of this study; however, 3,624 e-mail addresses were retrieved. We invited all 3,624 counselors to participate in the study. A reminder e-mail was sent out 1 week after the initial e-mail solicitation. Participants were offered an incentive of entering their e-mail address for a chance to win one of 20 gift cards valued $10 each to an online bookseller.

With 669 usable responses, we achieved a response rate of 18.5%. Participants were primarily White (76.0%), female (69.3%), ages 30–39 years (34.4%), nonadministrators (65.1%), and represented 48 states and the District of Columbia. Nearly half of participants held a doctoral degree (49.8%). Forty-four percent of participants identified as a psychologist, 28.4% as a counselor, and 16.5% as a social worker. Of the participants, 35.5% reported having more than 16 years of overall professional experience. Participants were primarily employed at large colleges or universities (49.4%), at public institutions (54.0%), and within nonmerged counseling centers (62.0%).

Instruments

Ethical environment. We used the Ethics Environment Questionnaire (EEQ; McDaniel, 1997), which was designed to assess perceptions of ethics in clinical settings among health care providers, specifically regarding ethics of the employing organization and the actual practice of health care. The EEQ consists of 20 self-report items and is scored on a 5-point Likert-style scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The mean score of the EEQ is 3.1, with scores of 3.5 or higher indicating a positive perception of one's ethical environment (McDaniel, 1997). Content, criterion, and construct validity have been described. The EEQ has manifested strong internal consistency, with coefficient alphas ranging from .90 to .93 (Corley et al., 2005; McDaniel, 1997; Ulrich & Soeken, 2005; Ulrich, Soeken, & Miller, 2003). Test–retest reliability of the EEQ is reported to be .88 (McDaniel, 1997). In this study, Cronbach's alpha for the EEQ was .96.

Organizational communication conflict behaviors. To assess communication strategies, we used Putnam and Wilson's (1982) Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI). The OCCI is a 30-item self-report survey that assesses both verbal and nonverbal communication strategies that participants tend to use in conflict episodes with their immediate supervisor. Three communication styles make up the three subscales of this measure: Nonconfrontation, Solution Orientation, and Control. Respondents indicate a position on a Likert-type scale, which ranges from 1 (*always*) to 7 (*never*). Internal consistency coefficients for subscores have ranged from .71 to .93. In addition, predictive, content, and construct validity have been reported (Putnam & Wilson, 1982; Wilson & Waltman, 1988).

Regarding the three subscales of the OCCI in this study, Cronbach's alpha was .90 for Nonconfrontation, .85 for Solution Orientation, and .74 for Control. Internal reliability coefficients greater than .70 are reported to be acceptable (Whitley, 2002). It should be noted that low scores on these OCCI subscales indicate a frequent use of that communication style, and high scores indicate infrequent use of that style. We reverse-coded the OCCI scale to aid in interpretation for regression analyses. Accordingly, high scores now indicate a frequent use of that particular communication style.

Job satisfaction. We assessed job satisfaction with the Abridged Job in General Scale (AJIG; Russell et al., 2004). This eight-item scale is an abridged version of the original 18-item Job in General Scale (JIG) and is a concise measure that also maintains strong psychometric properties. The JIG is part of a larger measure included in the Job Descriptive Index. The AJIG measures overall job satisfaction by asking participants if each item describes their job in general. A 3-point nominal scale is used for scoring (yes, no, and ?). A response of "?" is understood as the participant being unsure about the item as related to his or her job. Response scores are summed, with higher scores indicating greater levels of overall job satisfaction. Evidence of construct validity was preserved from the larger measure onto this more concise measure. Reliability for the AJIG has been shown to range from .83 to .90 (Russell et al., 2004). The internal reliability coefficient for the AJIG in this study was .82.

Results and Discussion

Analyses, findings, and related discussions are organized according to research question. The alpha level to determine significance was set at .05. Missing data were excluded from all analyses using listwise deletion.

Research Question 1

Descriptive statistics provided insight into the ethical environment for campus-based mental health counselors in the United States. The mean EEQ score for this study was 3.19, which is just slightly greater than the average EEQ mean of 3.1 (McDaniel, 1997). A mean above 3.5 indicates a positive perception of ethical environment (McDaniel, 1997), and thus this sample is reflective of neither poor nor overly positive perceptions of ethical environment. Regarding national samples of medical professionals, mean scores for the EEQ have been reported to be slightly greater (M = 3.23; Corley et al., 2005) as well as lower (M = 2.6; Ulrich et al., 2003) than the current sample.

Research Question 2

The overall mean for ethical environment was 3.19, but we wanted to know if perceptions of ethical climate varied by institution size, institution type, or both. To explore this question, we conducted a between-subjects analysis of

variance (ANOVA) with ethical environment as the dependent variable and institutional type and size as the fixed independent variables. Results indicated that the overall model was significant, $F(8, 600) = 2.08$, $p = .036$. Counselors across all three institution types reported similar ethical climates, $F(2, 600) = 0.16$, $p > .05$. However, counselors employed at different-sized institutions reported opposing perceptions of ethical climate, $F(2, 600) = 4.32$, $p = .014$. The interaction of institution type and institution size had no impact on ethical environment, $F(4, 600) = 1.44$, $p > .05$. Tukey's honestly significant difference (HSD) post hoc tests indicated that counselors employed at small institutions ($M = 3.24$) significantly differed from those employed at medium institutions ($M = 3.15$). Counselors at large institutions ($M = 3.19$), however, did not differ significantly from either small or medium institutions.

These findings suggest that counselors across institution types and sizes perceived an ethical environment similar to that described by clinical professionals in other settings (Corley et al., 2005; McDaniel, 1997). These findings are reassuring in that counselors as a group do not face a widespread ethical crisis. However, counselors at no institutional category reported a positive view of ethics, which raises questions about why ethical environments are not more positive. What ethical challenges do counselors face and how might these be resolved? One place to begin to explore these questions may be smaller institutions, because counselors at smaller institutions reported more favorable views of their institution's ethical environment. What is it about smaller institutions that promote more positive perceptions of ethical climates? Perhaps these institutions are less hierarchical, more intimate, and thus facilitate more effective communication. If this is true, then attention to communication at larger-sized institutions may promote more favorable ethical environments.

Research Questions 3 and 4

To explore relationships among communication conflict styles, ethical environment, and job satisfaction, we chose stepwise multiple linear regression with backward elimination. We generated a separate model for each of the three communication conflict styles (i.e., nonconfrontation, solution orientation, control). Analyses consisted of two steps. In the first step, the explanatory demographic variables of gender, race/ethnicity, age range, professional affiliation (i.e., counseling, psychology, or social work), education level, overall years of professional experience, and years employed at current institution were entered as the independent variables in each analysis. To improve interpretability in all regression analyses, we dummy-coded categorical independent variables into continuous variables prior to analysis (Howell, 2010). Dummy coding was used to explore associations among groups (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003) and to assess if "group membership moderates the effects of other explanatory variables" (Hardy, 1993, p. 5). This was done because predictors have more than two levels of categorization. Thus, we were able to compare the effect of one level of the factor relative to the level used as the reference.

In the second step, we added specific demographic variables of interest as independent variables, including institution type, institution size, counseling center type, fee-for-service schemes, and job duty (see Research Question 4). These independent variables were dummy-coded as well. Significant demographic predictors from the first step remained in the model. Explanatory demographic variables that were nonsignificant were removed from the model. Finally, job satisfaction and ethical environment were added as independent variables within this second step. Again, this process was repeated three times for each of the three conflict communication styles. Because the three outcome measures were tested against multiple predictors in the final regression models, a Bonferonni correction was used for each final regression model to help control familywise error rate (Howell, 2010). Results for each model are discussed in the following sections.

Nonconfrontation. The communication conflict style of nonconfrontation is defined as an indirect type of communication marked by withdrawal and avoidance (Putnam & Wilson, 1982). We found that counselors identifying racially as "other" and those with higher job satisfaction were less likely to engage in nonconfrontation communication behaviors. In contrast, participants who identified as nonadministrators reported more frequent use of nonconfrontation behaviors. The overall model for nonconfrontation explained 8.0% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .08$), $F(10, 571) = 5.98$, $p < .001$ (see Table 1).

TABLE 1

Summary of Final Regression Models of Organizational Communication Conflict Styles

Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	β	Zero-Order Correlation
		Nonconfrontation		
Constant	3.60	.16		
Job satisfaction	–0.04	.01	–.21***	–.22
Nonadministrators	0.32	.08	.16***	.16
Race: other	–0.74	.30	–.10*	–.08
		Solution Orientation		
Constant	4.43	.12		
Administrators	0.14	.07	.08*	.10
Job satisfaction	0.03	.01	.18**	.19
		Control		
Constant	3.88	.39		
Age				
50–59 years old	0.24	.08	.13**	.12
60 years or older	0.45	.10	.18**	.15
Employed 11–15 years	0.30	.10	.12**	.14
Ethical environment	–0.22	.12	–.07	–.09
Master's degree	–0.15	.06	–.10*	–.12
No fee charged	–0.27	.10	–.10*	–.10
Nonlicensed	–0.33	.11	–.12**	–.15

Note. Nonconfrontation $n = 582$; Solution Orientation $n = 610$; Control $n = 611$. Employed 11–15 years = employed at current institution for 11–15 years.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Nonconfrontation communication conflict styles may be appropriate strategies depending on context. Avoiding a conflict over ethical violations, however, is unlikely to preserve or restore ethical practice. Therefore, it is important to understand what motivates counselors to avoid conflict. The findings of this study indicate that lack of formal authority is an important consideration in this respect. This finding yields more questions than answers, and more research is warranted. How can counseling center directors encourage those who do not hold administrative titles to participate in confrontational discussions?

In contrast to nonadministrators, who tended to demonstrate frequent nonconfrontation behaviors, two groups of counselors reported infrequent use of nonconfrontation behaviors. First, counselors who identified their racial and ethnic background as "other" reported infrequent nonconfrontation behaviors. Is it possible that members of cultural and ethnic minority communities who have pursued successful careers in a majority-dominated environment have arrived to their positions because they have assertive communication skills? Or does pursuing a career in such circumstances force one to develop more assertive communication behaviors?

Second, counselors who reported greater job satisfaction reported infrequent use of nonconfrontation strategies compared with their less satisfied colleagues. While job satisfaction may be regarded simply as a way of retaining counseling staff, this study suggests an association with important organizational outcomes. Perhaps counselors practicing in an overall favorable climate enjoy closer relationships with their supervisors. At the least, greater job satisfaction suggests an absence of antagonism among counseling staff. As such, climates that are favorable to job satisfaction may also promote more direct approaches to communication in conflict episodes. In any case, the relationship between job satisfaction and less frequent nonconfrontation strategies indicates that job satisfaction is more than a means of retaining staff.

Solution orientation. A solution orientation communication conflict style involves assertive, direct, and fair behaviors such as collaboration and compromise. Counselors who held administrative duties and those with greater job satisfaction reported significantly more frequent use of solution orientation behaviors, $F(7, 584) = 4.56$, $p < .001$. This model explained 4.0% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .04$) in solution orientation behaviors (see Table 1).

As noted earlier, counselors with higher levels of job satisfaction were less likely to report nonconfrontation behaviors. This leaves the possibility that these counselors demonstrated more frequent control behaviors; however, our findings indicate that these individuals quite likely pursued solution orientation behaviors instead. The same can be said for counselors who held administrative responsibilities. Once again, job satisfaction seems to be an important consideration for counseling center directors who seek to promote effective communication.

Finally, positioning in an administrative hierarchy is again associated with potentially more effective communication strategies. One possibility is that counselors who are effective at finding solutions are more likely to advance

to administrative posts. Another possibility is that administrators learn these skills on the job, as solution orientation behaviors are more likely to produce desired organizational outcomes. Ultimately, participants who manifested greater job satisfaction and those who held administrative posts manifested increased collaboration and compromise within their workplace. It is possible that participants who behave in assertive and direct manners experienced greater happiness and possibly perceived a sense of influence over their work environment.

Control. Control is an aggressive style of communication in which an individual attempts to dictate the outcomes of a conflict with little regard for others' views. This study's findings suggest that age and work experience are important considerations in understanding counselors' tendencies to demonstrate control behaviors. Specifically, counselors ages 50–59 years, those 60 years or older, and those with 11 to 15 years of employment at their current institution reported more frequent use of control behaviors. In contrast, unlicensed clinicians and counselors whose highest degree was a master's degree reported less frequent use of control behaviors. Similarly, participants practicing in counseling centers where a fee was not charged also reported less frequent use of control behaviors. The overall model was significant, $F(12, 575) = 5.95$, $p < .001$, with predictors explaining 9.2% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .092$) in control behaviors (see Table 1).

It is possible that counselors who are less politically connected or potentially less powerful have not developed controlling behaviors. On the other hand, generational differences could explain the use of control strategies among older counselors. In either case, power dynamics are implicated, and counseling directors should remain aware of the vulnerability of their younger and newer counselors to such power dynamics.

Conversely, master's-level and nonlicensed counselors were less likely to demonstrate control behaviors, although these variables did not positively predict either nonconfrontation or solution orientation behaviors. In other words, whereas these participants were less likely to demonstrate control behaviors, they were not more likely to demonstrate either solution orientation or nonconfrontation behaviors. Quite likely, the tendencies were divided more or less equally between these two alternatives.

One should not assume that master's-level counselors are less experienced than their colleagues. In fact, these participants may be quite experienced and seasoned but may feel silenced within counseling center dynamics because they do not hold a doctoral degree, which was the predominant degree of this sample. Overall, findings related to control behaviors indicate a possible struggle regarding power dynamics within the campus-based counseling center, with master's-level counselors possibly feeling like they lack a voice compared with counselors who held a doctoral degree, who appear to be leading the charge of change within counseling centers.

In this study, 8.6% of participants reported that their counseling center charges fees for therapy services. This variable turned out to have predictive

significance, as counselors employed at centers where there is no fee for service reported infrequent control behaviors. Future research is necessary to explain why this is the case, but we suspect that fee-for-service policies may indicate resource constraints, a more managerial and therefore less collegial culture, or both. In such cases, competition for resources may encourage more frequent use of control behaviors.

Some additional findings related to communication conflict behaviors were found. We had hypothesized that counselors employed within merged centers may experience differences from nonmerged center counselors regarding their communication conflict styles, because merged centers typically add another layer of bureaucracy (Brown et al., 2007). However, this was not the case, as no differences were found in communication conflict styles between counselors employed within merged counseling centers and those employed within nonmerged centers. A merged counseling center most likely still employs a counseling center director, in addition to a student health services director. The counseling center director may add a buffer between the counselor and institutional administrators and related bureaucracy, which is a similar finding to our previous work (Jodoin & Ayers, 2013).

Research Question 5

The final research question dealt with job satisfaction and institution type and size. Similar to the analysis for ethical environment, we conducted a between-subjects ANOVA. Job satisfaction served as the dependent variable, and institution type and size served as the fixed independent variables. The overall model was significant, $F(8, 656) = 3.02$, $p = .002$. Results indicated that counselors across institution types reported similar levels of job satisfaction, $F(2, 656) = 0.22$, $p > .05$. The interaction of institution type and size had no bearing on job satisfaction, $F(4, 656) = 0.99$, $p > .05$. On the other hand, counselors in institutions of different sizes differed in their overall levels of job satisfaction, $F(2, 656) = 7.38$, $p = .001$. Tukey's HSD post hoc tests indicated that participants at small institutions ($M = 21.77$) reported significantly higher levels of job satisfaction compared with counselors at medium ($M = 19.99$) or large institutions ($M = 19.34$).

It is not immediately clear why participants at smaller institutions reported greater job satisfaction. One possible explanation may be that smaller institutions have a better student-to-counselor ratio than do medium or large institutions. Gallagher (2012) reported that small institutions (<2,500 students) have a 1:867.3 counselor-to-student ratio, whereas medium institutions (2,500–7,500 students) have a 1:1,600 counselor-to-student ratio, and larger institutions (>7,500 students) have approximately a 1:2,000 counselor-to-student ratio. If this explanation is true, it would also support our notion that resource constraints are taxing on counselors, leading to lower job satisfaction in addition to more frequent control behaviors.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

A large sample was obtained in this study, but the response rate of 18.5% was lower than the anticipated 20% to 30% response rate typical of Internet surveys (Dillman, 2007). Data were collected during the spring 2013 semester, which is certainly a busy time of year in campus-based counseling centers. In the future, studies conducted during a different time of year may yield enhanced participation rates.

Because of the exploratory and novel nature of this research, findings should be considered tentative until the study is replicated. A limitation of this study is that the OCCI seeks responses based on the participant's interaction with a direct supervisor, and in this population of both nonadministrators and administrators, one's direct supervisor may have been the director of the counseling center or an associate vice chancellor, for example. Future researchers may wish to break down these administrative differences.

In addition, as fiscal resources become increasingly scarce, colleges and universities are responding with policies on session limits (Ghetie, 2007). Where they exist, session-limit policies may be enforced to varying degrees, with the clinical judgment left to the counselor whether to terminate the student or make an off-campus referral for longer term services (Gallagher, 2012). Therefore, future research should consider session-limit policies in regard to ethical environment, communication conflict styles, and job satisfaction.

Implications for Practice

The purpose of this novel study was to explore the ethical environment of campus-based mental health centers, the ways in which counselors deal with organizational conflict, and the relationship with job satisfaction. Campus-based counselors seem to maintain their ethical standards within their higher education workplace, despite any potential institutional pressures or demands. Although counselors across all three institutional types had an average view of their ethical environments, no overly positive perceptions were reported. While institutional and administrative challenges abound, these findings are concerning for counselors, counseling center directors, and institutional administrators, because they raise questions of what is occurring within campus counseling centers and the surrounding institution that causes this lack of positive perception. Future research can further explore the specific factors within small institutions (e.g., less hierarchical and more intimate and transparent in nature) that may contribute to enhanced perceptions of one's ethical environment.

In this study, we examined the tendency of counselors to demonstrate frequent or infrequent use of three communication conflict styles, which may be independent of ethical conflict. Our assumption is that these tendencies manifest

similarly for various types of conflicts, but given the emphasis on ethics in professional socialization, counselors may be more likely to confront conflicts based on ethical concerns than other sources of conflict. The findings imply that an internal power struggle may be occurring within counseling centers, with differing communication conflict styles found among counselors who hold differing graduate degrees. It is imperative that all counselors, regardless of their degree, licensure status, or years of experience, be honored for their professional experience and voice. It was an assuring finding that counselors who held an administrative position within their center manifested solution orientation behaviors with their supervisors. Given the difficult challenges that current counseling centers face, such as increases in demands for services, budgetary concerns, and increased threats to campus (Flynn & Heitzmann, 2008; Gallagher, 2012), this is an ideal initial finding regarding counseling center and institutional relations.

Finally, counselors who manifested strong job satisfaction displayed fewer avoidance behaviors and more solution-oriented behaviors and were employed at smaller institutions. These findings suggest that working to increase collaboration among counselors and administrators may result in less antagonistic or avoidant behavior by counselors, resulting in greater job satisfaction and less turnover, ultimately benefiting the students. Working to promote transparent communication styles, as well as offering counselors a voice in the direction of policies and practices of the center, may help to improve counselor job satisfaction.

Exploring college and university counselors' communication conflict styles, perception of ethical environment, and job satisfaction offers a necessary first step in creating a body of work that may help institutional administrators, counselors, and counseling center directors better understand the individual and institutional variables within campus-based counseling centers and how these factors affect professional practice. Implementing systems and policies that not only eliminate barriers to effective communication but also promote productive negotiations, while supporting professional autonomy, is indicated in order to create strong, functional systems that will ultimately benefit students.

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