



An Investigation of Counsellor Burnout Levels and Intervention Strategies in Public and Private Universities in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Institutional counsellors, like all mental health professionals are at a high risk of suffering burnout. High caseloads and job role ambiguity increase their propensity for burnout. The purpose of this study was to establish counsellor burnout levels in public and in private universities in Uasin Gishu County. The target population comprised of counsellors from all public and private universities in Uasin Gishu County. The Maslach Burnout Inventory Questionnaire (MBIQ) was used to collect data. The study established that burnout levels among counsellors in the public universities were found to be higher than in the private universities. The caseloads handled by counsellors in public universities were generally higher than those of their counterparts in private universities due to the student-counsellor ratio in public universities which was higher than the recommended ratio. Counsellor Training Institutions (CTI) should incorporate burnout theoretical knowledge in the counsellor training curriculum. The findings are significant to the management of universities and other learning institutions in formulating policies on student-counsellor ratio.

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Introduction

Professional counsellors, due to often overwhelming needs of clients and heavy caseloads, are at high risk of burnout. Research indicates that burnout among institutional counsellors is a common phenomenon (Jenaro, Flores, & Arias, 2007). Burnout is often experienced as “a state of physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in emotionally demanding situations” (Gilliland & James, 2011). Self-care and recognition of burnout symptoms are necessary for counsellors to effectively care for their clients as well as themselves. Counsellors struggling with burnout can experience diminished morale, job dissatisfaction (Koeske & Kelly, 2009), negative self-concept, and loss of concern for clients (Rosenberg & Pace, 2010). Clients working with counsellors experiencing burnout are at serious risk, as they may not receive proper care and attention to often severe their complicated challenges.

Burnout is a term that was originally coined by Freudenberg (1974) as a debilitating psychological condition caused by unrelieved work stress and characterized by depleted energy, increased depersonalization in interpersonal relationships, increased dissatisfaction and pessimism, increased absenteeism, and work inefficiency. Burnout affects approximately 39% of counsellors (Lambie, 2007). Previous researchers have recognized the impact of burnout among counsellors, social workers, psychiatrists and psychologists (Russell, 2009; Skovalt, 2011). University counsellors, who bring education and mental health together, may be particularly vulnerable because of their job demands. Typical demands include heavy caseloads and environments with constant role ambiguity (Brewer & Clippard, 2011). The American Counsellors' Association (ACA) describes counsellors as responsible for students' academic, career, and personal/social development; this in itself is a monumental task (ACA, 2008).

Counsellors often feel pulled in many directions and are at risk for high levels of stress, exhaustion, and overall burnout in

their daily work (Butler & Constantine, 2005; Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006). Baggerly and Osborn (2008) found that even though the majority of counsellors in their study reported being satisfied with their job, almost 90% of their participants reported increased stress due to job demands over the past couple of years. The potential fallout and consequences associated with counsellor burnout may significantly affect students, families and the overall institutional environment (Lambie, 2007).

However much university counsellors remain objective with the varied issues they handle, they must also open themselves up to the experiences of their student clients through empathy. University counsellors often interact with student-clients who are experiencing psychosocial, social, or physical problems. Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter (1996) posit that the counselling atmosphere between a counsellor and a client can be charged with intense emotions that the client may be experiencing. Maslach *et al.*, (1996); Bosarino, Figely and Adams (2004) concur with the view and contend that working with such clients can be emotionally draining and may cause counsellors chronic stress which can lead to burnout.

Corey (2009) contends that burnout saps the counsellor's vitality and renders him helpless. He advises counsellors to continually look within themselves to make decisions that keep them alive and prevent the inevitable burnout associated with this ‘helping profession’. Following Corey's (2009) proposition, the researcher sought to establish whether student-counsellor ratio in universities in Kenya contributes to counsellor burn out and the related repercussions among counsellors in public and private universities in Uasin Gishu County in Kenya.

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related repercussions among counsellors in public and private universities in Uasin Gishu County in Kenya.

Statement of the Problem

Burnout has become a recognized problem in human service professions. Studies conducted among counselors indicate a high level of counselor burn out in institutions. A counsellor's ability to remain poised under a client's emotionally disturbing condition is critical. This puts a premium on stamina, emotional balance, and a reasonably stable personal life on the part of a counselor. It follows that periods of instability, emotional conflict, and interpersonal strife in a counsellor's life might lead to burnout. A counsellor needs to operate in an environment of tranquillity if he is to successfully assist a troubled client.

With the introduction of the double intake programme in Kenyan Universities coupled by the parallel degree program schedule, student enrolment in these universities has skyrocketed. However, the number of counsellors in these universities has not been commensurate with student enrolment. The American Counsellors' Association sets an optimal student-counsellor ratio to 250:1. This has not been the case in universities in Uasin Gishu County. Counsellors in these universities have been reported to have resigned from their professions and this has of late become a common trend.

On the basis of the aforementioned, this study found it imperative to explore the relationship that exists between student-counsellor ratio and counsellor burnout in public and private universities in Uasin Gishu County.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to comparatively establish differences in burnout among counsellors in public and private Universities in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya.

Research Objectives

The research objectives of the study were:

- (1) To determine burnout levels among counsellors in universities in Uasin Gishu County.
- (2) To establish the difference between burnout levels among counsellors in private and public universities in Uasin Gishu County.

Research Hypothesis

The study tested the following hypothesis:

HO₁

There is no significant difference between burnout levels among counsellors in private and public universities in Uasin Gishu County.

Research Design and Methodology

This study adopted an *ex post facto* design since the researcher did not manipulate the variables under study but instead, examined the variables in their existing condition.

The study targeted all the public and private Universities in Uasin Gishu County. Twelve counsellors were randomly from the twelve universities in Uasin Gishu County. The Maslach Burnout Inventory Questionnaire (MBIQ) was used to solicit data from the counsellors.

Results

Difference between Burnout levels among Counsellors in Private and Public Universities

It was established in this study that the student-counsellor ratio in the sampled public universities was way above that in the sampled private universities. The student-counsellor ratio significantly influenced burnout levels among student counsellors in the sampled universities. To test burnout levels among the student counsellors, a MBIQ was used. Burnout levels were tested on three sub-scales. These sub-scales were Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Depersonalization (DP) and

Personal Accomplishment (PA). There were 22 questions on the MBIQ.

Aggregate scores were used to test the level of burnout among counsellors. An aggregate score of less than or equal to 13 in subscale was ranked in the lower range; 14 to 20 was placed in the average range; while greater than or equal to 21 was placed in the high range. The higher the aggregate mean of Emotional Exhaustion (EE), the higher the burnout levels. The higher the aggregate mean of Depersonalization (DP), the higher the burnout levels. However, the higher the aggregate mean of Personal Accomplishments (PA), the lower the burnout levels. A summary of the computed aggregate means of the three sub-scales among counsellors in the sampled public and private universities is illustrated in Table 1.

It can be noted in Table 1 that Emotional Exhaustion (EE) among counsellors in the sampled public universities was higher than the Emotional Exhaustion (EE) of counsellors in private universities by a margin higher than 21, which was the value for the higher score of Emotional Exhaustion. The implication of this disparity is that, counsellors in the sampled public universities experience higher burnout levels on the Emotional Exhaustion sub-scale.

Like Emotional Exhaustion, counsellors from the sampled public universities experienced a higher Depersonalization (DP) score of 18.3 than their counterparts in the sampled private universities who only recorded a score of 9.7. This implies that counsellors from the sampled public universities exhibit a negative and detached outlook about their counselling job more than their counterparts in the sampled private universities. The counsellors from the public universities distance themselves more from their student-clients more than those in the private universities.

Counsellors from the sampled private universities recorded a higher score on Personal Accomplishment (PA) than their counterparts in the sampled public universities. This implies that counsellors from the private universities indicated a job satisfaction attribute more than those from the public universities.

Besides, counsellors from the sampled private universities exhibited competency in serving their student-clients, having developed the skill to handle and understand their clients. On the contrary, majority of counsellors from the public universities had issues serving their clients and did not understand their clients most of the time. This scenario could be attributed partly to the disparities in the student-counsellor ratios in the public and private universities. Counsellors in the private universities attend to a lower number of students and therefore create time to understand their clients.

In their seminal work, Maslach and Jackson (1981) concur with this finding when they describe a tripartite set of symptoms arising from prolonged workplace exposure to chronic interpersonal stressors: emotional exhaustion (feelings of emotional overextension and depletion of emotional resources), depersonalization (loss of idealism and negative, cynical attitude and feelings about others), and reduced personal accomplishment (feelings of reduced competency and self-efficacy) as the main causes of burnout among counsellors.

Counsellor's Case Loads

The study also sought to establish the case loads of the counsellors on average per day. Majority (66.7%) of student counsellors from public universities indicated that their case loads on average per day ranged from 6 to 10 clients. Only 25% (3) of student counsellors drawn from private universities had a case load of between 6 and 10 clients.

Table 1. Aggregate means of EE, DP and PA

University	Aggregate Mean		
	Emotional Exhaustion (EE)	Depersonalization	Personal Accomplishment
Public	51.8	18.3	37.8
Private	22.0	9.7	46.3

Table 2. Correlation between student-counsellor ratio and counsellor burnout in public Universities

Correlations			
		Student-Counsellor ratio	Counsellor burnout
Student-counsellor ratio	Chi-square Correlation	1.000	.789
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	6	6
Counsellor burnout	Chi square Correlation	.789	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	6	6

p < .05

Table 3. Correlation between student-counsellor ratio and Counsellor burnout in private universities

Correlations			
		Student-counsellor ratio	Counsellor burnout
Student-counsellor ratio	Chi-square Correlation	1.000	.815
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	6	6
Counsellor burnout	Chi square Correlation	.815	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	

p < .05

Majority of counsellors from private universities had a case load of between 1 and 5 clients on average per day.

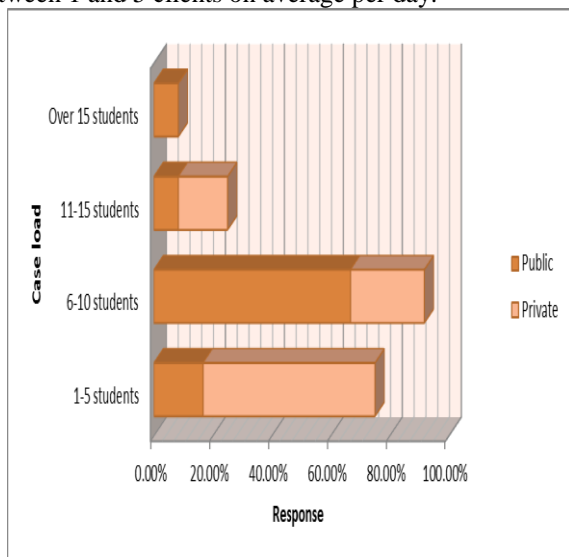


Figure 1. Case loads of Counsellors in public and private universities

Figure 1 alludes to the fact that more counsellors from public than private universities have a higher case load.

Relationship between student-counsellor ratio and counsellor burnout in public Universities

A Chi-square correlation coefficient was computed to establish the correlation between student-counsellor ratio and counsellor burnout among counsellors in public universities. Table 2 presents the analysis.

A strong correlation that was significant was found $r = .789$, $p = .000$. The null hypothesis was rejected and therefore, Student-Counsellor ratio was found to have a significant

influence on Counsellor burnout. Kesler’s (1990) observation that institutional counsellors are more vulnerable to burnout because of high levels of professional stress due to their various job demands, role ambiguity, role conflict and large numbers of students, is in tandem with the finding of this study. Kesler (1990) notes that student counsellors may be at high risk of burnout than any other professional owing to the high number of students that they serve. Further, Stephan (2005) found out in a study investigating counsellor burnout that 66% of middle school counsellors in a state-wide sample reported high levels of emotional exhaustion and 77% reported high levels of depersonalization majorly due to high numbers of students that were under their watch. It can therefore be concluded that student-counsellor ratio in the sampled public universities is generally high and that this has significantly contributed to burnout being experienced among the sampled counselors.

Relationship between student-counsellor ratio and counsellor burnout among counsellors in Private Universities

To determine the correlation between student-counsellor ratio and counsellor burnout among counsellors in private universities, a Chi-square correlation analysis was computed. Table 3 presents a summary of the analysis.

A strong correlation that was significant was found $r = .815$, $p = .000$. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected. Therefore, student-counsellor ratio was found to have a significant influence on counsellor burnout. The low burnout level among counsellors was attributed to the low student-counsellor ratio in private universities. It can therefore be concluded that student-counsellor ratio in the sampled private universities is generally low and that this has significantly managed burnout among the sampled counsellors.

Discussion and Conclusion

Difference between Burnout Levels among Counsellors in public and Private Universities

To test burnout levels among the student counsellors, a MBIQ was used. Burnout levels were tested on three sub-scales. These sub-scales were Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Depersonalization (DP) and Personal Accomplishment (PA). Aggregate scores were used to test the level of burnout among counsellors. An aggregate score of less than or equal to 13 in subscale was ranked in the lower range; 14-20 was placed in the average range; while greater than or equal to 21 was placed in the high range. The higher the aggregate mean of Emotional Exhaustion (EE), the higher the burnout levels. The higher the aggregate mean of Depersonalization (DP), the higher the burnout levels. However, the higher the aggregate mean of Personal Accomplishments (PA), the lower the burnout levels. Emotional Exhaustion and depersonalization scores among counsellors in the public universities was higher than those among counsellors in the private universities. Further, Personal Accomplishment among counsellors in the private universities was higher than among counsellors in the public universities. This is therefore a manifestation that counsellors in public universities experience more burnout levels than their counterparts in private universities.

Impact of Student-Counsellor Ratio on counsellor Burnout in Public Universities

An aggregate mean student-counsellor ratio of 1:2,172 in the sampled public universities was realized. The mean scores for Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Depersonalization (DP) and Personal Accomplishment (PA) of 51.8, 18.3 and 37.8 respectively was found. The student-counsellor ratio was considered high and hence significantly influenced burnout levels among counsellors in the public universities. When a Chi-square analysis was computed to establish the correlation between student-counsellor ratio and counsellor burnout among counsellors in public universities, a strong correlation that was significant was found $r = .789, p = .000$. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected. Therefore, student-counsellor ratio was found to have a significant influence on counsellor burnout.

Impact of Student-Counsellor Ratio on counsellor Burnout in Private Universities

An aggregate mean student-counsellor ratio of 1:721 in the sampled private universities was found. The mean scores for Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Depersonalization (DP) and Personal Accomplishment (PA) of 22.0, 9.7 and 46.3 respectively were found. The student-counsellor ratio was considered relatively low as compared to the ratio in public universities.

Burnout levels among counsellors in the sampled private universities were therefore lower than the levels in the public universities. To determine the correlation between student-counsellor ratio and counsellor burnout among counsellors in private universities, a Chi-square correlation analysis was computed and a strong correlation that was significant was found $r = .815, p = .000$. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected.

The study found out that the student-counsellor ratio in the sampled public universities was higher than that in the private universities. This was majorly due to the high enrolment in public universities as compared to the private universities. Burnout level among counsellors in the public universities was found to be higher than in the private universities. The caseloads handled by counsellors in public universities were higher than those of their counterparts in private universities. However, it

was found that the student-counsellor ratio in public universities was still higher than the recommended ratio. The finding regarding caseload size is especially relevant considering that ASCA recommends a student to counsellor ratio of 250:1 (ASCA, 2010).

The researcher believed that larger caseloads meant more demands from counsellors as well as a higher standard of accountability for counsellor performance which would result in counsellor burnout. The mean scores for the three sub-scales (Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment) that were employed in measuring burnout among the counsellors in public universities were a clear manifestation of higher burnout levels. The contrary is true for counsellors in private universities who recorded a lower level of burnout.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- i. Since caseload size impacts negatively on the performance of counsellors yielding burnout, hiring more skilled counsellors, particularly in public universities will provide additional support to the student population as well as relieve the added stress of overwhelmingly large caseload sizes.
- ii. Since counsellors work with populations whose work affects them so directly, maintaining wellness, preventing burnout, and avoiding impairment are key to providing good therapeutic care.
- iii. Counsellor Training Institutions (CTI) should incorporate burnout theoretical knowledge in the counsellor training curriculum so that counsellors-in-training can start appreciating burnout management in the formation stages.

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