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Job Satisfaction in School Psychology Graduate Preparation: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

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Keywords

School psychology, Job satisfaction, Academia

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JOB SATISFACTION IN SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY GRADUATE PREPARATION: A PILOT STUDY

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Abstract: This pilot study investigated the status of job satisfaction among school psychology faculty with the hope of gaining insight in to factors that may encourage doctoral-level graduates to pursue jobs in academia. A second purpose of the study was to discover areas of improvement in job satisfaction to support current faculty members in continuing in their chosen careers. Finally, the study sought to establish the reliability of a job satisfaction instrument for use in larger-scale studies. A total of 94 school psychology faculty members in specialist-level and/or doctoral-level National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)-approved programs completed an author-designed survey. The 34-item survey was clustered into the following categories: Compensation, Role/Function, Personal Fulfillment, Colleagues, Graduate Candidates, and Administrative Support/Resources. At an item level, participants reported overall satisfaction with their jobs and satisfaction in most areas of their employment. Exploratory analyses revealed only a few significant differences in individual item satisfaction. Specifically, participants ranked as Full Professor reported significantly higher satisfaction with the tenure and research expectations than those participants who identified themselves as Assistant Professors. Additionally, participants indicated job satisfaction in four out of six categories. Cronbach's alpha for the overall instrument was .92 with the current sample.

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JOB SATISFACTION IN SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY GRADUATE PREPARATION: A PILOT STUDY

Introduction

As early as 2000, literature in school psychology began predicting a decline in and eventual shortage of university faculty members in school psychology (Curtis, Grier, & Hunley, 2004; Little, Akin-Little, & Tingstrom, 2004; Clopton & Haselhuhn, 2009; Davis, McIntosh, Phelps, & Kehle, 2004; Fagan, 2004; Kratochwill, Shernoff, & Sanetti, 2004; Nagle, Suldo, Christenson, & Hansen, 2004; Tingstrom, 2000). A number of factors have been proposed as contributors to the decline including retirement of faculty members trained in the 1960s and 1970s, an increase in training standards, an influx of women in the field, the requirements of the job, and a lack of awareness of the field among undergraduates (Fagan, 2004; Little & Akin-Little, 2004; Little, et al., 2004). As evidence of the shortage, Clopton and Haselhuhn (2009) found 136 open positions across approximately 70 programs from the 2004 – 2005 and 2006 – 2007 academic years with a mere 66.7% of the positions filled.

Despite the literature indicative of a shortage in the field and its proposed contributing factors, few studies have addressed the job satisfaction of faculty members presently working within school psychology graduate education. In 1995, Reschly and Wilson published a study comparing the job satisfaction of practicing school psychologists with that of school psychology faculty members from the years of 1986 and 1991-1992. It was found that the overall level of satisfaction among the faculty members was higher than that of their practitioner counterparts. However, faculty member job satisfaction data has been largely lacking from the literature of the field for over two decades. The current study addressed this void by examining the status of job satisfaction within the school psychology academic community. This exploration into areas of possible satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction of university trainers of school psychologists is believed to offer further insight into factors that may encourage doctoral-level graduates to pursue jobs in academia or support academics in continuing in their chosen careers. In fact, Clopton and Haselhuhn (2009) highlighted the need for research in this area as beneficial to the field in its recruitment and retention of university faculty members in school psychology. Stark, Perfect, Simpson, Schnoebelen, and Glenn (2004) indicated that the graduate school environment may be a determinant in whether candidates consider academia for their careers.

Recruitment Issues in Academia

Understanding the current status of the field begins with comprehension of its potential workforce. School psychology graduate education programs have risen considerably in number with a range of 220 – 240 programs in existence today (Fagan, 2008). Despite the proliferation of graduate education programs in school psychology, the percentage of individuals with a doctoral degree appears to be rising more slowly than expected, with 28% in 1994 and 33% in 2007 (Fagan & Wise, 2007). Additionally, Graves and Wright (2007) reported that graduate candidates in both doctoral and non-doctoral degree programs had chosen the field for similar reasons. Of participants across both groups, 92.2% indicated that working with children was their primary reason for pursuing school psychology as a career.

Similarly, Nagle et al. (2004) found that many graduate candidates purposefully avoid academic positions due to the role's primary focus on adults rather than children. Thus, it appears that the field of school psychology begins with a relatively small number of graduates who are educationally qualified for the position of faculty member and an even smaller number who desire to work in educating adults versus roles involving daily contact with children. These two issues combine for an extremely limited workforce that is likely related to the shortage in filled positions noted by Tingstrom (2000) and Clopton and Haselhuhn (2009).

The perspectives from graduate candidates in school psychology on careers in academia offer important insights for recruitment. Nagle et al. (2004) conducted a study to determine school psychology graduate candidates' perspectives on the benefits, concerns, and incentives in becoming a faculty member. The results indicated that candidates believed the roles and functions of a faculty member are the greatest benefit to this position; the attractiveness of the work environment was ranked as the second greatest benefit. Salary and benefits and the perceived importance of the job title were not considered positive attributes by the graduate candidates. In addition, a major detraction from becoming a university faculty member is the perceived amount of stress associated with scholarship (publishing research and securing external funding) and the tenure process. In addition to addressing these two issues, participants indicated that other incentives for pursuing academia would relate to more emphasis on applied work (e.g., with children), increased salaries, and provision of mentors.

In 2004, Stark et al. surveyed one university's graduate candidates in school psychology to garner their perspectives on academic careers as well as former graduate candidates who had pursued academic careers. The purpose of the survey was to determine which of the position's attributes attracted them to the job. The current candidates indicated that their interest in the career was based on the diversity of the position's responsibilities, the opportunity to teach/train, and the flexibility in schedule. Similar to Nagle et al. (2004), these graduate candidates also noted that the preference for applied work, the less competitive salary, scholarship expectations, and conflict with family life may be deterrents from pursuing academia. Among the alumni participants, the type and variety of job responsibilities were favored attributes of the job. The non-competitive salary was cited as a deterrent for why others may choose careers outside of the university setting.

In addition to the aforementioned issues with recruitment into faculty positions, Little and Akin-Little (2004) have indicated that the feminization of the field may be contributing to fewer doctoral candidates entering into school psychology graduate education as a career. They proposed that women may choose to be more geographically limited in their search for employment, thereby making it difficult to pursue an academic career. This decision is often made when they have already started a family and would like to remain close to extended family members. Additionally, the authors posited that women continue to be the primary caretakers of children and may prefer the schedule of the practicing school psychologist over that of the academic year for alignment with children's summer and holiday schedules.

Retention Issues in Academia

Across a variety of career fields, studies have reported that higher levels of education (similar to the doctoral degree in school psychology) are related to lower overall job satisfaction (Bashaw, 1998; Clark & Oswald, 1996; Ward and Sloane, 2000). However, based on the results from Reschly and Wilson (1995), school psychology appears to be unique in this regard when comparing the job satisfaction of university faculty members and field-based practitioners. The researchers found that while both groups reported overall positive job satisfaction, there was higher satisfaction in the sample of university trainers. This was found in the areas of promotion, nature of the work, and supervision. Another area of high satisfaction for the academic faculty members related to work with colleagues.

Issues of compensation are often prominent in discussions of job satisfaction within any field, and school psychology is no exception. Despite the common belief among graduate candidates and others that the faculty salaries in school psychology are less than practitioner salaries (Little & Akin-Little, 2004; Nagle et al., 2004; Stark et al., 2004), the data in this area are less definitive. Little and Akin-Little (2004) reported that employment in the schools was more lucrative than assistant professor positions in many areas of the country. However, Reschly and Wilson (1995) found, "Faculty salaries from primary employers exceeded practitioner salaries by approximately \$9000 in 1991-1992." Although much may have changed in the economic circumstances of both groups in the past 20 years, the authors pointed out that university graduate educators often have many more opportunities to supplement their primary incomes through compensated activities such as consulting work, private practice, and royalties from books (Reschly & Wilson, 1995). One might also surmise that payment through grants and contracts may have increased as scholarship expectations for academics have risen at many institutions since the time of that publication. A survey of NASP members in 2005 found that the average salary for school psychologists across all employment settings was \$60,581 (Curtis et al., 2006), and an APA survey in 2003 found the average school psychologist salary to be \$78,000 (Chamberlin, 2006).

Beyond salary concerns, job satisfaction data for academics in general and school psychology graduate educators in particular, often relate to scholarship expectations. Again, graduate candidates commonly indicated that this is an area of great concern that is inhibiting their entrance into academic positions (Nagle et al., 2004; Stark et al., 2004). Nagle et al. (2004) surmised that graduate candidates may perceive more risk with research than teaching expectations. Indeed, there is some validation to the perceptions regarding research expectations. Reschly and Wilson (1995) found that faculty members in school psychology indicated that the top priority at their respective institutions is research. Their data supported that the majority of the academic participants reported publishing at least one peer-reviewed article in the previous 12-month time period; participants reported scholarly productivity ranging from 0 – 20 publications in that same time frame. Participants also noted that rewards in academic institutions are more often based on scholarship-related accomplishments than any other function of faculty members. Additionally, Reschly and Wilson (1995) noted that although universities often place the greatest importance on research, and faculty members are acutely aware of those expectations, the majority of the graduate educators' time continues to be spent in teaching and service roles.

Need for Current Research

The literature in the field of school psychology has documented a number of issues related to recruitment and retention of graduate educators. However, little consensus is found in the perceptions and realities of this career path. Additionally, critical data on the actual job satisfaction of faculty members in school psychology graduate education programs is significantly limited. Thus, a current survey of faculty members was conducted to determine how the job is perceived from current faculty members in the field in the present academic context. This exploration of issues related to satisfaction/dissatisfaction of those working in the academic positions can provide direction for addressing the potential shortage created by insufficient recruitment and retention of faculty members in school psychology.

Method

Participants

The purpose of the study was to survey all full- and part-time school psychology faculty members in specialist-level and/or doctoral-level NASP-approved programs across the United States with regard to issues of job satisfaction. The intent was to pilot both the instrument and the methodology for investigating job satisfaction among graduate educators in school psychology. As of August 1, 2011, 186 programs were fully or conditionally approved by the NASP. Due to difficulty with distribution, 182 of the 186 programs (97.85%) were contacted for survey participation. The survey link was emailed to the coordinator of each program. That individual was asked to forward the survey to all school psychology faculty members in his/her program. The methodology was employed because of the continually changing faculty make-up across graduate education programs. A total of 94 participants subsequently completed the survey. It is difficult to determine an actual response rate for the sample, as it is unclear how many school psychology program coordinators forwarded the survey as requested to the faculty in their programs.

Within the survey sample, 39 participants were male (41.5%) and 55 were female (58.5%) with 91 (97.8%) reporting their ethnicity as Caucasian, one participant identified as Hispanic (1.1%) and one as other (1.1%). No participants reported their ethnicity as African American or Asian. Participants were allowed to skip questions, which yielded missing data; therefore, the data do not always sum to 94. With regard to job related demographics, there were considerably more participants reporting full-time employment ($n = 86$; 93.5%) than part-time employment ($n = 6$; 6.5%) as school psychology university faculty. The academic rank of participants included the following: Assistant Professor ($n = 20$, 21.5%), Associate Professor ($n = 41$, 44.1%), Full Professor ($n = 30$, 32.3%), and Administrator ($n = 2$, 2.2%). Of the participants, years of experience as school psychology faculty members ranged from one year to more than 20 years. Sixty-seven (72.8%) participants reported having tenure, and 25 (27.2%) were non-tenured faculty. Twenty-three participants (24.7%) indicated that they also have employment outside of their academic position.

Instrumentation and Procedures

After consulting relevant job satisfaction literature (Chung, Song, Kim, Woolliscroft, Quint, Lukacs, & Gyetko, 2010; Iiacqua, Schumacher, & Li, 1995; Reschly & Wilson, 1995), the authors designed a 34 item survey utilizing a five point Likert-scale format ranging from Very Unsatisfied (1) to Very Satisfied (5). In spring 2012, an email with a link to an online survey tool was sent to the school psychology program coordinators as identified in the NASP database. The coordinators were asked to also distribute the survey to all other faculty members within the program. The program coordinators received a reminder email about survey participation at the two-week mark.

Results

After data collection, descriptive statistics were calculated on individual items and categories created by clustering items that were of similar content/theme based on previous literature and the face validity of the items. The categories were as follows: Compensation (3 items), Role/Function (10 items), Personal Fulfillment (5 items), Colleagues (4 items), Graduate Candidates (3 items), and Administrative Support/Resources (8 items). The final item for overall job satisfaction was left to stand alone. It was not clustered with any other items to allow participants to report their perceived job satisfaction. Given that this study was employed to pilot the instrument for use with larger-scale job satisfaction studies, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the overall instrument and the aforementioned clusters. The internal consistency reliability data are demonstrated in Table 1. Table 2 offers the means and standard deviations of each item in descending order of satisfaction.

Table 1
Internal Consistency Reliability

Item Content	Cronbach's α
Overall Instrument	.92
Personal Fulfillment	.85
Colleagues	.71
Graduate Candidates	.68
Role/Function	.83
Compensation	.75
Administrative Support/Resources	.80

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Individual Items in Descending Order of Satisfaction

Item Content	Mean	SD	n
Your choice to pursue an academic career as a school psychology faculty member	4.48	0.67	90
The level of student success in your program	4.44	0.83	91
The school psychology program at your university	4.41	0.71	92
Your role in impacting the lives of others	4.33	0.68	92
Teaching as a career	4.33	0.68	91
The level your skills and abilities are challenged in your job	4.31	0.68	91
Your personal fulfillment in your position	4.26	0.81	92
Your colleagues	4.24	0.76	92
Your overall job satisfaction	4.11	0.90	92
Working with adults	4.09	0.76	90
Your academic rank in your program	4.07	0.96	90
Your weekly schedule	4.02	0.93	91
Your daily hours	3.97	1.02	91
The amount of collaboration with faculty in your department	3.90	0.91	91
The benefits package offered to you	3.88	0.94	91
The amount of services you are expected to provide to students and the community	3.85	0.79	91
The current number of school psychology candidates in your program	3.77	0.96	92
The amount of services you provide to students and the community	3.77	0.86	90
The balance between work, family, and personal growth	3.76	1.14	92
The tenure process at your university	3.75	1.14	91
The amount of hours you work per week	3.74	1.10	91
Your current workload (i.e. number of classes you teach, number of advises)	3.68	1.07	92
The amount of administrative support	3.65	1.06	92
The amount of support provided to help develop your teaching skills	3.63	0.89	92
The amount of research you are required to produce/publish	3.63	1.03	91
The communication between faculty and administration	3.51	0.96	91
The amount of collaboration with faculty in other departments	3.45	0.87	91
The number of school psychology candidates applying to your program every semester	3.45	1.11	91
The amount of resources available to you	3.42	1.13	89
The financial support provided by your university for professional development	3.18	1.19	92
The amount of travel funds you receive	3.14	1.19	91
The amount of research support you receive	3.08	1.15	90
The manner in which salary increases are determined	3.01	1.19	92
Your pay at your current rank	2.99	1.19	92
The adequacy of state financial support for your program	2.35	1.06	89

Regarding the individual items, the participants reported overall satisfaction ($M = 4.11$, $SD = .90$) with their jobs and satisfaction in most areas of their employment. In fact, participant responses resulted in means higher than 3.5 in 25 out of 34 (73.53%) areas surveyed and greater than 4.0 on 12 (35.29%) job satisfaction items. On the nine items with means less than 3.5, six are related to financial issues including resources, financial support, salary, and travel funds. Yet, these items continue to rate as neutral with means between 2.99 and 3.45. The only item with a mean in the range of dissatisfaction was related to state financial support for the participants' school psychology program ($M = 2.35$; $SD = 1.06$).

Exploratory analyses revealed only a few significant differences in individual item satisfaction based on demographic variables of the participants. Specifically, those participants who indicated their rank as Full Professor reported significantly higher satisfaction with the tenure process [$F(2, 89) = 3.18$, $p = .03$] and research expectations [$F(2, 89) = 2.92$, $p = .04$] than those participants who identified themselves as Assistant Professors. There were no significant differences in either area between Assistant Professors ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.34$ tenure process; $M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.20$ research expectations) and Associate Professors ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.07$ tenure process; $M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.03$ research expectations) or Associate Professors and Full Professors ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.94$ tenure process; $M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.78$ research expectations).

Additionally, participants indicated job satisfaction in four out of six categories with mean scores greater than 3.5 and neutral satisfaction in the remaining two categories. Descriptive statistics for the categories are summarized in Table 3. Participants seem to experience particular personal satisfaction in their position as graduate educators in school psychology with all five of the Personal Fulfillment items ranking in the top ten individual items with the highest mean scores. Conversely, six of the lowest ten rated job satisfaction items are in the Administrative Support/Resources category, and two of the lowest three items with regard to mean score come from the Compensation category.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of Categories in Descending Order of Satisfaction

Item Content	Mean	SD
Personal Fulfillment	4.34	0.08
Colleagues	3.92	0.34
Graduate Candidates	3.89	0.50
Role/Function	3.89	0.24
Compensation	3.29	0.51
Administrative Support/Resources	3.24	0.42

Discussion

The job satisfaction of current school psychology faculty members was believed to offer an important look at recruitment and retention issues in light of projected shortages. Similar to Reschly and Wilson (1995), the present pilot study found an overall high level of job satisfaction among the graduate educators and satisfaction in many areas of employment at the item level. The study also found that the survey instrument employed in the research demonstrates sufficient internal consistency reliability for use in larger-scale job satisfaction studies.

Previous research has highlighted concerns among graduate candidates about entering academia based upon salary, the tenure process, and research expectations (Nagle et al., 2004; Stark et al., 2004). This investigation appears to confirm some of the concerns in this area. Items related to pay and resources were generally rated as neutral. Although this is clearly not indicative of dissatisfaction among the participants, it does represent an area for improvement in the job relative to other areas of satisfaction. Additionally, the responses in these areas may be reflective of the overall economic climate of our country in general and higher education at this time. With regard to scholarship expectations, participants reported satisfaction with the amount of research that they are expected to produce. However, they were neutral regarding the resources that they are provided to do so. This may suggest that faculty are aware of universities' emphasis on this area of the job (as indicated in Reschly & Wilson, 1995) and are meeting those expectations despite a need for greater resources. Finally, while graduate candidates may express intimidation and pressure related to the tenure process (Nagle et al., 2004), the current data suggested that participants in school psychology academic positions are satisfied with the process. It appears that participants become increasingly positive about the process as they progress through the academic ranks.

An especially encouraging finding with regard to both retention and recruitment of academics is that the school psychology faculty members reported high personal fulfillment in their jobs. In addition, school psychology faculty members reported satisfaction in areas related to their colleagues, their graduate candidates, and their role/function. Although Nagle et al. (2004) reported that graduate candidates often avoid careers in academia due to its focus on adults rather than children, it seems that graduate education programs should work harder to promote the satisfaction with the position within the university community. Specifically, the personal fulfillment that school psychology faculty are expressing based upon their work with adults should be discussed with graduate candidates. Stark et al. (2004) found that graduate candidates believed that discussing "...the scope and advantages of an academic career" would facilitate interest in the job. Indeed, it seems that the current data support many positive aspects of the position that deserve promotion in the potential workforce.

Previous research seems to suggest that graduate candidates are well-aware of and accurate in their perceptions of the job's pressures. However, it appears that school psychology faculty members need to make greater efforts in highlighting the benefits of the job. With regard to retention and the levels of satisfaction expressed among this study's participants, retention seems probable outside of the natural progression to retirement. There is no school psychology literature suggesting a high rate of self-selection out of university positions among those early in the career. Thus, taken together, the literature base and the current study support that the key to

addressing any future shortage of trainers lies in attracting and recruiting capable graduate candidates to the field.

Limitations in the current research include those issues inherent in any survey methodology including sampling bias and response sets. An additional limitation is reflected in the fact that an accurate response rate cannot be deduced due to the study's procedures of asking program coordinators to distribute the instrument to the remaining faculty members. Thus, a new larger scale study of job satisfaction of school psychology faculty members is forthcoming. Although the current instrument is sufficient for research purposes, additional items will be added to the clusters with internal consistency reliability lower than .80, and some items will be expanded for greater clarity.

Despite the limitations, the pilot study offers an initial glimpse at the state of job satisfaction among university graduate educators of school psychology to begin the process of addressing recruitment and retention issues in faculty.

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