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The Possibility of School Counselor's Attributions Changing by Location

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The Possibility of School Counselor's Attributions Changing by Location

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Graduation in the Honors College

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Abstract

This paper discusses a potential research project to look at school counselor's attributions changing based on their location. Research has been done on counselor's making internal and external attributions but none has been done on whether their attribution style changes based on their town. A project is proposed that would look at the Greater Rochester Area in an attempt to see if those in schools of poorer towns or cities look at their students differently than those in more affluent towns. The research would use a self-report measure that differentiates attribution styles and would then be supplemented with an interview that uses scenario and open-ended questions. Implications of the research could influence how school counselors are trained and certified or show evidence that counselors are being trained accurately on how to leave their predispositions out of their roles.

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School counselors are an instrumental portion of a student's life from elementary school until they graduate high school or even college. They are placed in schools in order to promote the academic, career, personal, and social development of their students through individual counseling, group counseling, and classroom guidance (Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs, n.d.). School counselors are not meant to simply hand out college applications or make schedule changes, they instead play a vital role in maximizing student success through leadership, advocacy, and collaboration (American School Counselor Association, 2016).

Among the issues that are facing contemporary school counselors is the challenge of addressing the needs of students with an increasing variety of individual temperaments and abilities (Lee, 2001). However, school counselors who are not aware of their predispositions or attitudes may find it harder to fulfill their role. All students, regardless of judgements that may be made of them, deserve equity of quality counseling services. A school counselor's position is meant to promote optimal academic, career, and personal-social development (Lee, 2001). Anything that could hinder this for a student needs to be addressed by schools and their counselors alike.

Literature Review

An example of a predisposition counselors could have is an attribution, the process where individuals explain the cause of behavior and events. Attributions are multidimensional but one locus includes internal vs. external. Internal attributions are when people infer that an event or a person's behavior is caused by personal factors, whereas external attributions are inferences that

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an event or a person's behavior is caused by situational factors (Kelley, 1967). Weiner (1980) found that attributions of individuals influence the helping behaviors they receive. For example, if an individual is perceived as responsible for their misfortune, as in if another makes an internal attribution of an individual's problem, aid is typically withheld from them. If an individual has an external attribution made about them then they are more likely to receive assistance and sympathy (Weiner, 1980). This relates to school counselors because if a counselor makes such attributions it influences the amount of assistance a student receives, changing the equality that they are supposed to advocate for.

Examples of these attributions occurring can be seen in multiple areas. One case in relation to mental health is in women with post-partum depression as evidenced by Ruybal and Siegel (2016). Women who are stigmatized with an internal attribution and believed to be at fault for their depression are looked down upon with pity and anger. On the other hand, women that are seen as being biologically susceptible to depression and given an external attribution are more likely to receive aid with their mental health and newborn baby. Another example was exhibited by Boyle (2014) as speech pathologists who viewed students as in control of their stuttering problems decreased their willingness to help, lowered their sympathy and increased their anger. Those that viewed these students as having a biological problem or external attribution, changed their behavior so that these students received more help and sympathy (Boyle, 2014).

Anyone can make attributions about the causes of behavior. Zschorn and Shute (2016) found that when a child has a disability, parents' attitudes and helping behaviors are determined by their appraisal or attribution of the situation. Parents answer questions including: What is the problem? Who is to blame? Why did it happen? And When? Based on the answers to these

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questions the researchers found a range of sub-themes that indicated that the attributions of these answers influenced parent attitudes toward their children's disability. Jacobs, Woolfson and Hunter (2016) also found similar findings for parents whose child had a disability. Those who were found to view their child's problematic behavior as caused by a variety of items, both related and unrelated to the disabilities, changed whether the causes were seen as stable and uncontrollable or unstable and controllable. This then influenced the extent to which parents felt responsible for their child's behavior.

Teachers have been found to fall into this trap as well when making interpretations in relation to their class size. A relatively large class size makes teachers more likely to interpret student difficulties as external, pupil-related factors while smaller class sizes lead to more internal conclusions (Cuevas, 2007). These teachers were also found to select family-related factors as external attributions for student behavior when they ranked the student higher on perceived stress, which increased with a larger classroom (Cuevas, 2007). Jager and Denessen (2015) also spoke about how attributions of low achieving students were found to predict a teacher's efforts to provide optimal learning contexts for such students. This study also concluded that a teacher's attributions differed greatly from student to student as well as class to class.

Like aforementioned, attributions can occur in a wide-range of roles but more specifically they can be made by school counselors toward their students. Peterson, Wonderlich, Reaven and Mullins (1987) found that internal attributions of a child's disorder can cause a counselor to view them more negatively. Internal attributions of a child with depression caused the children to be more rejected and rated as less attractive. Counselors also believed that the child would have more negative behavior in the future as well due to the attributions that were made about the

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children. If these expectations and judgements were communicated to a child in any way they were also found to enhance feelings of low self-esteem, inadequacy, hopelessness and possibly dysphoria. This study also concluded that external attributions did not create a more positive reaction of counselors but just implied that the child was depressed for a legitimate reason as opposed to the idea that they were causing their own problem (Peterson et al., 1987).

A counselor who assumes that students are responsible both for creating and for solving their own problems creates different expectations for students than one who believes that students are not responsible for creating or solving their own problems (Jackson, Holt, & Nelson, 2005). For example, Western countries, when compared to Eastern countries, have been found to have more school counselors and psychologists who believe in the responsibility of the individual to solve their own problems (Jackson et al., 2005). Western cultures base this idea on the belief that the development of autonomy and independence is a prerequisite for optimal development which leads to the idea that individuals are accountable for their own actions (Jackson et al., 2005). Holding an individual more responsible for their actions is also characteristic of more affluent schools, as they were found to focus more on what caused a problem and why it occurred. On the other hand, poorer schools have been found to hold students more accountable for their solutions to the problem and focus on a solution to it (Jackson et al., 2005).

If a counselor's attitude toward a child changes with the cause of this problem, it is appropriate to mention that counselor's attitudes also change with the child they are interacting with. Peterson et al. (1987) found that counselors are more likely to feel depressed or hostile when interacting with depressed individuals. However, these feelings only change when the

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cause of the depression is seen as external instead of internal. Regardless, feeling depressed or hostile around a child is not associated with an increase in helping behavior.

Attributions that counselors make about clients have also been found to influence the services that the counselors then provide (Worthington & Atkinson, 1993). Worthington and Atkinson (1993) found that trained counselors can have a systematic bias towards emphasizing certain characteristics of clients when choosing forms of therapy. Most were found to emphasize internal explanations while minimizing situational explanations in order to use a treatment made for such dispositional causes. Counselors create such preference for counseling strategies through theoretical orientations and attributions of responsibility and etiology instead of focusing on what would help the client most. These preferences are then relayed to the child as they are treated for emphasized characteristics instead of holistically by the counselor.

When trying to understand clients, and determine what causes behaviors, counselors observe what is happening while considering the context. What a counselor makes a determination about the cause of problem behaviors it influences diagnostic decisions, symptom recognition and treatment predictions (Kernes & McWhirter, 2001). It has been shown that people tend to hold others more responsible for their situations if they perceive those individuals as having been in control of their previous behaviors. People are less likely to want to help others they perceive to be responsible for their situations (Kernes & McWhirter, 2001). In other words, through the observations that a counselor undergoes, they are less likely to hold a client responsible for overcoming their difficulties when they are not reacting to an event. Internal characteristics are consistently viewed as less amenable to change (Kernes & McWhirter, 2001). However, if a school counselor is making attributions that influence their attitude toward their students like aforementioned, it can harm the development of their students. Greater availability

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of counselors has been associated with higher student test scores and better mental health behavior (Reback, 2010). However, attributions can potentially harm a counselor's ability to aid students if they vary their helping behavior based on a child.

Despite the existing research on school counselors' attributions and their attributions based on mental health, there exists no research on school counselors' attributions based on location. This study would look at the question of whether school counselors make attributions of their students in relation to the city and area they are in. For example, in areas such as Rochester, NY, the wealth gap of the population is one of the largest in the United States (Dennis, 2011). Within the nine county Greater Rochester Area, the poverty rates vary greatly. Doherty (2013) found that the city of Rochester itself held about 60% of the areas poor population while holding less than 30% of the actual population. The report also showed that Rochester's poverty rate is around 31% but the surrounding areas are much less including Victor, NY with a poverty rate of 2.2% and Webster, NY with a poverty rate of almost 16%.

This research aims to look at the Greater Rochester area and determine whether a school that a counselor is placed in influences the attributions they make. The reason this is plausible is because poverty is associated with poor health care leading to illness and disabilities (World Health Organization, 2016). Poverty can also be associated with poor life situations for children as a result of the complications and frustrations poverty causes itself (American Psychological Association, 2016). The study will look at whether a counselor takes these factors into account for a child's behavior and creates more external attributions in poorer areas to explain and subsequently help or treat these behaviors. The question to be answered is as follows: Does a school counselor located in a poorer city make more external attributions of a child's behavior than those in more affluent areas?

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Method

Participants

Participants will include school counselors in districts across the Greater Rochester area. For the purpose of this study, this area will include the nine-county region as discussed by Doherty (2013) which includes the counties of Genesee, Livingston, Monroe, Ontario, Orleans, Seneca, Wayne, Wyoming and Yates. The study would aim for representative counselors from only high schools to increase validity by only using one age group.

The study would also aim for a variety of counselors in each area respective to the proportion of students in their county. For example, Monroe County houses the city of Rochester, NY which means that there would be more students in that area than in the surrounding primarily suburban counties. To define whether a counselor is in a poor city or more affluent one, a separate proportion would be created for each area in order to distinguish between what defines a poor town vs. an affluent one.

Procedure

The research will focus on interviews and also include a self-report measure. The self-report measure will be an adaption of a measure created by Snarr, Slep, and Grande (2009) meant to assess parent attribution style and separate child-responsible attributions from parent-causal ones. The prompts will be adapted to reflect the switch from parents to school counselors and can be found in Appendix A. When counselors are asked to answer the questions, they will be asked to think about specific students. In order to define these students for each counselor a list of students will be obtained to control the experiment to the fullest extent. Five students will be randomly chosen that fit the following descriptors: student is in grade nine and above; student

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has a history of classroom disruptions and/or peer bullying. The counselor will then complete the assessment for each student. The data will then be compiled to obtain an average for the counselor in their attribution style. The data submitted by all of the counselors will then be separated by city or town to see if the child-responsible vs. counselor-causal attributions change based on poverty levels and urban vs. suburban populations.

The interview will follow the self-report measure and begin with scenario questions that include a student in a situation that is ambiguous to their town and possible attributions. This will be meant to provide supplemental information in case there is a correlation between location and attribution style. During these questions the counselors will be asked to consider the situation like it was one in their own school. After hearing the scenario, the counselor will be asked guiding questions as well as be given the chance to freely speak about the situation. For scenarios and guiding questions for them please see Appendix B and C. The scenarios are meant to introduce counselors to a new student and assess their attribution styles in a different way than would be seen from just the assessment on their own students.

Following scenario questions the counselors will be asked about their schools in general. The scenarios would be designed for the counselors to react to a situation but in a case where they make both internal and external attributions a follow-up interview would be useful. During these interviews, they will be asked guiding questions that allow them to talk about their school and common problems or counseling services they provide. For the interview questions please see Appendix D.

Answers to the scenarios and the interview questions will then be compiled and determined to lean toward internal or external attributions without being attached to a counselor. A separate researcher from the one conducting the interviews would be responsible for this

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identification. Once this is determined, the researcher will place the data in coordination with the counselor again to determine if location is a determining factor in attributions that the school counselors can make. The appropriate statistical analysis to use will depend on the extent to which there appears to be a correlation between location and attribution style. If a correlation appears then statistical analysis can be used to determine if there is potential for causation, however without the appearance of a correlation there would be no need for such analysis.

Discussion

It is expected that the attribution style of counselors will vary based on location. More specifically, counselors in towns or cities that are deemed low income or disadvantaged are expected to make more external attributions than more affluent ones. This is a result of the idea that counselors in poorer areas associate problems more with outside circumstances. It is unexpected that an affluent area's school counselors would make greater external attributions than internal but if that were to occur further research would need to be conducted to understand why. Another result that could happen is that the school counselors have no distinction in the type of attribution they make. While this is unexpected, this result would be a good sign that exhibits school counselor's truly setting their personal theories aside to help their students. However, this finding would be inconsistent with the current research identifying how common attributions are.

Possible limitations of the study include Rochester, NY being one of the poorest cities in the United States. While this may seem important to the study it can also be an additional cause of external attributions as counselors are aware of the city they are in. If the results exhibited more external attributions in low-income towns, then the study would need to be replicated or

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expanded upon in another area where a large wealth gap exists but the citizens of the area are not as aware of their problem.

Results of the study could have multiple implications. One could be requiring additional training or classes for a school counselor to become licensed. New York State specifically does not have a policy that requires school counselors to take a course on poverty and its implications outside of looking at multicultural counseling or contemporary issues of counseling. New York State also does not require school counselors to attend counseling to identify their own predispositions before helping students. If these attributions are found to be effecting a counselor's ability to aid their students then certification could need to be re-evaluated. Perhaps school could look into obtaining funding themselves to create their own training initiatives centered around poverty.

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Appendix A

Please rate how much you would agree, in general, that the following **reasons** for misbehavior are true for the **target child** and his/her behavior for the **past two months**:

	Always True	Frequently True	Sometimes True	Occasionally True	Rarely True	Never True
1. I was not as firm as I usually am. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
2. The child won't listen. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
3. I'm not structured enough with the child. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
4. The child cannot understand the rules. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
5. The child thinks that he/she is the boss. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
6. I don't know how to handle the child. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
7. I don't give the child enough attention. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
8. The child is headstrong. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
9. It's hard for me to set limits. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
10. The child is in a stage. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
11. The child wants what he/she wants when he/she wants it. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
12. I was tired at the time. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
13. I handle the child in a non-confident way. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
14. The child purposely tries to get me angry. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
15. The child feels like there is no time for him/her. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
16. I'm not patient. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
17. The child tries to get my goat or push my buttons. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
18. The child wants things his/her way. 5 6	1	2	3	4		
19. It's difficult for the child to do what I want. 5 6	1	2	3	4		

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20. I can't control the child. 5 6	1	2	3	4
21. I couldn't respond quickly enough at the time. 5 6	1	2	3	4
22. I'm not able to be clear. 5 6	1	2	3	4
23. The child is very demanding. 5 6	1	2	3	4
24. I handled things in an unusual way. 5 6	1	2	3	4
25. The child likes to see how far he/she can push me. 5 6	1	2	3	4
26. I was busy with something at the time. 5 6	1	2	3	4
27. I don't do the right thing. 5 6	1	2	3	4
28. The child tires easily. 5 6	1	2	3	4
29. I have a hard time really listening to the child. 5 6	1	2	3	4
30. The child refuses to do what I think he/she should do. 5 6	1	2	3	4

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Appendix B

Scenario Questions:

- 1) An eleventh-grade male has recently lost interest in school. He claims that he no longer had any interest in going to college and wants to work after he graduates. You take the time to ask his teachers about him and they say that he has become less engaged in his classes and no longer sits with his friends during lunch. They also say that he has not been doing his homework which is making his grades suffer.
- 2) Two tenth-grade females got into a fight during lunch. They were caught pulling each other's hair and the altercation was stopped before it could escalate further. When asked immediately after, both girls responded that the fight was about nothing. However, when they were asked an hour later one said that the fight was about a boy while the other claimed it was about their friendship.
- 3) A ninth-grade male has been caught hiding in the bathroom during lunch repeatedly. Teachers have come to you saying that he has not been seen eating in the lunch room for quite a while and has lost a lot of weight. When asked if the male is okay he always replies yes and insists he is not hungry or just isn't feeling well.
- 4) A twelfth-grade female has recently been missing a lot of school or coming into classes during the early afternoon. She has been distancing herself away from her friends who claim that she isn't their friend anymore but she has still been seen with her boyfriend quite often. He takes her home from school every day but is always overheard asking the female what they will be doing next year.

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Appendix C

Guiding Questions for Scenario Questions:

- 1) What do you think might be going on with the student?
- 2) How would you reach out to the student?
- 3) What kind of resources would you have ready for the student?
- 4) What do you think is causing the current problem?
- 5) Would you seek additional counsel before and/or after speaking with the student?

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Appendix D

Guiding Questions for Interview/Discussion:

- 1) What are some common problems in your school?
- 2) What typically causes these problems?
- 3) Do these common problems help you identify similar things in other children?
- 4) Do you think your school has any common problems that other schools might not find as common?
- 5) If so, why do you think the problems vary?