

Chapter Five

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

5.1 Conclusions

The study has examined correlates and predictors of empathy among women school counsellors. The main findings of the study are as follows:

- 1) The result of the present study has indicated that compassion fatigue and two components of burnout (emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation) were negatively related to empathy among women school counsellors.
- 2) Compassion satisfaction, gratitude, personal accomplishment (component of burnout) and emotional intelligence were positively related to empathy among women school counsellors.
- 3) Three types of prosocial behaviour (emotional, dire and compliant) were positively related with empathy and other three types (anonymous, altruism and public) were not related with empathy among women school counsellors.
- 4) Job burnout emerged as a negative predictor of empathy among women school counsellors.
- 5) Gratitude, perception of emotions and depersonalisation emerged as positive predictors of empathy among women school counsellors in the present study.

5.2 Implications

In the light of present findings, it is important to discuss the implications of the results in developing and promoting empathy among women school counsellors. Empathy is a vital component for counselling relationship as well as for the school counsellors. It is important to build and promote such programs and models which aim to foster and cultivate empathy among school counsellors.

School counselling has great potential to help students achieve high standards in their academic, career, personal and social growth (House & Martin, 1998).

The transitions in the family structure and the growing social trends with a collapse of conventional support system has produced a gap for satisfying the physical, psychological and social requirements of the students, highlighting the need for a substitute support system to meet the requirements of the students (Kohad&Kazi, 2014). Changing family trends such as working mothers, divorces, single parent families have reduced the emotional cushioning provided so far by most of the Indian families. Also, the immense technological advances, the increased social life and issues such as drug abuse have contributed to stress and strain among the students (Kohad & Kazi, 2014).

School counselling has emerged as a benefit in the present era of distress and competition among the students. The immediate need for school counselling and the efforts of school counsellors need to be recognised which would help in effective use of this discipline in preventing and addressing the numerous psychosocial, emotional, behavioural and academic needs of the school students. A school counsellor's role is "to support academic, career and personal/social development, facilitate learning opportunities and help build skills to maximize student success" (Clark & Ametee, 2004; Dahir & Stone, 2006). Despite the awareness about the vital requirement of school counsellors, they are not considered as a crucial part of the school system. It is important to focus future research on helping professionals specifically keeping school counsellors in the spotlight.

"One doesn't have to operate with great malice to do great harm. The absence of empathy and understanding are sufficient." - Charles M. Blow.

Experiencing and communicating empathy is one of the chief factors in the foundation of student-counsellor relationship. Past research shows that empathy may be accountable for about 7-10 % of the overall treatment result (Bohart, Elliott, Greenberg, & Watson, 2002; Sachse & Elliott, 2002). This signifies the importance of skill of empathy to be encouraged and cultivated among counsellors.

It has been observed that because of the characteristics of their job, counsellors are more susceptible to experience negative consequences of being in a helping profession i.e. compassion fatigue and burnout. Results of the present study

indicated that empathy may act as a buffer against the harmful effects of such negative emotional states. Significant negative association between empathy and compassion fatigue and burnout has been suggested in the previous literature as well as in the present study. Lack of empathy may give rise to burnout and fatigue further deteriorating the counsellor's ability to deal effectively with the students. However, there are mixed results concerning the relationship between empathy and compassion fatigue, therefore it is important to conduct more research on the two constructs in order to determine its precise association with each other.

Despite the heightened risk of developing compassion fatigue and burnout, there is dearth of research studying these two constructs in relation to empathy among school counsellors and barely any study within Indian context. There is a need for more research to be done in this area to create awareness about the risk of burnout and compassion fatigue particularly among school counsellors.

Compassion fatigue if not addressed, may further lead to hyper-vigilance, nightmares, sleeplessness, agitation, or fatigue (Newell & McNeil, 2010). The National Institute of Mental Health (2014) reported that the primary symptoms of STS include "hopelessness, inability to embrace or disdain of complexity, avoidance of clients or others, fear, physical ailments, and minimizing problems and guilt." Bride (2007), in his study, reported that the prevalence of at least one symptom of STS among helping professionals is 70 percent.

Therefore counsellors need to be educated about various techniques to combat fatigue and burnout during their counselling training program or graduation years which could improve empathy and serve as protection against burnout and compassion fatigue. This will be an important contribution to counsellor education and the field of counselling thereby by promoting counsellor wellness and efficacy. Elizabeth (2011), for example, suggested the need to provide coaching of stress reduction techniques, such as progressive relaxation, yoga, meditation, and autogenic techniques, to counselling students during their graduate training as tools to maintain wellness and ward off the symptoms of burnout and fatigue among themselves.

Psychology Council bodies like Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) can arrange monthly conferences and hands on workshops for school counsellors, by expert professionals and trainers, in order to create awareness about the risk of developing compassion fatigue and burnout and strategies to combat them.

“Stop masking your pain for it will bleed through somewhere else in your life.” —Sherna Benjamin.

Once the counsellors are aware of presence of compassion fatigue and burnout, school counsellors can get themselves enrolled in the therapy programs like “BOUNCE BACK”. It is a skill building program where trainers help the helping professionals in managing depression or anxiety and are supported and guided on their path to mental wellness. They learn different ways to cope with emotionally exhausting situations and recover from traumatic experiences, so they can get back to their normal functioning in life. The school counsellors can experience and exhibit grit and resilience in their professional roles.

Another important revelation through the results of this study is the positive role of emotional intelligence, gratitude and prosocial behaviour in maintaining and strengthening empathy. Emotional intelligence is a combination of abilities that help counsellors to better understand their feelings and that of others further enhancing the empathetic tendencies. Emotional intelligence positively influences school counsellor’s ability to build empathetic relations with the students thereby contributing towards student’s welfare.

According to previous research, both Emotional Intelligence and Empathy can be improved through education (Bertram et al., 2016). Also studies suggest considering personality of the counsellors while creating any program to enhance empathy and emotional intelligence among helping professionals (Bertram et al., 2017; Cherry et al., 2012; Debbi, 2015). Hence future research should focus on understanding the relationship between empathy, emotional intelligence and personality of the school counsellors.

Educators of counselling training should focus on building such emotional literacy skills by incorporating them in the syllabus designed for trainee counsellors.

Adding small training programs, teaching emotional control and empathy skills to the school counsellors along with academic theory can prove to be a useful approach.

Some strategies to increase the capacity for emotion regulation include practicing self-talk or verbal cues, physically removing oneself from a situation to a more comfortable or familiar setting, and practicing effortful control of one's physical or verbal reactions (Wagaman et al., 2015).

Gradually, researchers have started to explore the constructs of positive psychology to improve human life and one such factor that is receiving great attention is effect of gratitude on psychological health of helping professionals (McCollough et al., 2002). Gratitude is a positive emotion and grateful people are found to be more empathetic, optimistic, happier, less disheartened and contented with their lives (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). The result of the present study shows that gratitude is strongly associated with empathy of the school counsellors. Despite the proven benefits of gratitude intervention programs, connection between empathy and gratitude is comparatively unknown. It is important for future researchers to examine the relationship between these two constructs as it may provide a pathway to enhance empathy among school counsellors via gratitude.

Simple and easy gratitude based exercises like keeping gratitude journals, counting one's blessings and visualizing best possible selves (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Sheldon et al., 2006; Froh et al., 2008) can be incorporated in counselling curriculum.

In addition to this, results of the present investigation suggest that prosocial behaviour plays an important role in the development of empathy. In support with this, Poulin and his colleagues (2013) observed that prosocial behaviour helps to fight risk of burnout and fatigue. They interviewed 846 people and found that engaging in helping behaviours promotes better health and reduces the threat of stress and fatigue.

The positive correlates of empathy discussed in the present study will overall promote empathy which provides a foundation for sustainable student-counsellor relationship. Such skills should be incorporated in the counselling programs at early

stages so that the future counsellors can reap its benefits later while working professionally.

Empathy plays a central role in counselling relationship resulting in positive student outcome. Past researchers agree on the fact that empathy can be taught and cultivated through training (Batt-Rawden et al., 2013; Butters, 2010; Kirby, Tellegen, & Steindl, 2017; Berkhout & Malouff, 2015). For instance, behavioral skills training (such as instruction, modeling, practice, and feedback) (Berkhout & Malouff, 2015) and communication skills training (Stepien & Baernstein, 2006) were both found to be powerful ways to amplify empathy. As the technology is being advanced, there is new technique invented to foster empathy viz. mobile application based exercises and games (Fry & Runyan, 2017; Konrath, in progress).

Truax and Mitchell (1971) conducted an influential study of 40 hours of empathy training with 12 counsellors. The result indicated statistically significant increase in counsellor's empathy level suggesting that empathy training helped to improve the counsellor's empathy level.

Academically, empathy is taught to counsellors during basic counselling skills (Bayne & Jangha, 2016), purposely because "empathy is believed to lie in the accurate reflection of feeling and meaning" (Truax & Carkhuff, 1967). But researchers argue that empathy is much more than just the verbal communication of understanding (Davis, 1980; Vossen et al., 2015) which needs to be explored further. Despite the fact that empathy is an essential part of the counselling process, much of the research on empathy among counsellors is either out-dated or is very limited with hardly keeping school counsellors in the focus.

Thus, it is suggested that empathy can be taught and learned by school counsellors. Strategies such as "mindfulness and emphasis on boundary setting" (Wagaman et al., 2015) will help school counsellors look into the process of emotion sharing and increase their self-other awareness.

5.3 Contribution to knowledge

Research globally has highlighted the fact that empathy is important for counselling relationship. Stress and Burnout, when pronounced among helping

professionals, affect not only the professional themselves but also have a negative effect on the quality of service provided to their clients (Mohan et al., 2019). Empathy may serve as a buffer against the negative effects of Burnout and Compassion Fatigue among professionals involved in human service. The present study clearly helps us to understand the correlates of empathy and also provide in-depth clarity on psychological routes through which empathy can be enhanced and maintained among women school counsellors.

5.4 Suggestions for future research

Results clearly highlight that empathy serves as an important tool to fight against negative consequences of helping others. School counsellors, because of the nature of their work, are more likely to experience compassion fatigue and burnout in the future and require strategies to maintain empathy. A comprehensive strategy addressing psychological risk factors is recommended for maximum benefit.

Future research should undertake various correlates of empathy among school counsellors. There is a need for high quality and effective intervention-based counselling program to promote overall psychological welfare of the school counsellors.

Creating awareness about conditions like burnout and compassion fatigue among counsellor trainees, during early graduation years, should be taken into consideration by future researchers.

Future research can compare two groups of counsellors in terms of years of work experience (novice vs. experienced).

To further deepen the understanding, future research can focus on identifying gender differences among school counsellors on correlates of empathy.

Future research can make use of advanced statistical techniques like structural equation modelling, path analysis, meta-analysis etc. to explore into new theoretical formulations.

“That which does not kill us, makes us stronger”, the famous quote by *“Nietzsche”*, is an affirmation of resilience which aptly depicts the frustrating double-

bind inherent in a counsellor's functioning. Empathy facilitated through emotional intelligence, gratitude and prosocial tendencies can be a potent resource that keeps the difficult path of school counselling going strong and keeping the school counsellors gritty.