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The Impact Organizational Factors Have on Role Ambiguity Amongst School Social Workers

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore what organizational factors increase or decrease role ambiguity amongst school social workers. This study attempted to provide practical information for schools on the influence of specific organizational factors on role ambiguity so that they can provide a supportive work environment for school social workers and students. A cross-sectional survey design was used to provide a snapshot of the current organizational factors impacting the ambiguity of school social work roles from a sample of 73 members of the School Social Work Association of America. Some findings were not congruent with the literature. The results showed that the majority of participants in the study reported to “agree slightly” that their role was clear in the aspects of method, scheduling, and criteria. In opposition, the majority of participants reported to “disagree slightly” to feeling “neutral” when it came to ranking the efficiency of organizational factors (employee engagement, internal communication, and supervision). In a direct regression model, supervision and job experience were the only two factors that had an impact on role ambiguity. In a moderating regression model, the moderating variable, job experience, showed to have a significant moderating effect on the impact internal communication and supervision had on role ambiguity. However, it did not show to have a significant moderating effect on the impact employee engagement had on role ambiguity.

The Impact Organizational Factors Have on Role Ambiguity Amongst School Social
Workers

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Social Work

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

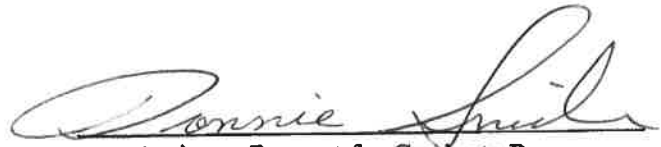
Master of Social Work

Melissa Kichura

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This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Melissa Kichura, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

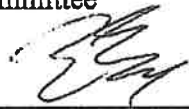
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This thesis is dedicated to my mother and father, Patricia and Kenneth Kichura. Your
love and endless support made this a reality.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A school social worker's role is to support students and empower them to overcome barriers in their life. School social workers set out to provide this level of support by assessing areas of need in a client's life and providing the most beneficial interventions for that need. Social workers not only assess the areas of need of the client, but they also assess the needs of the school and community in which their client lives. The assessment given allows them to recognize where their services fit amongst the support systems that are already in place. This level of support can bring many benefits to the students, schools, and communities who receive them; however, role ambiguity in school social work has been shown to prevent the full benefits of social work services.

Role ambiguity can be defined as a lack of information defining the responsibilities and expectation of performance evaluations in a given position (Coll & Freeman, 1997; Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005; Rizzo, House, & Litzerman, 1970; Van Sell, Brief, & Schuler, 1981). Role ambiguity is seen as a serious obstacle for schools and can cause consequences such as preventing school social workers from using their skills at full capacity as well as causing burnout due to work overload (Morrison, 2017). When addressing the roles of school social workers, one must also look at the schools they are serving.

Schools have unique organizational factors specific to their campus that may impact the roles and tasks school social workers are given. Due to this understanding, it is essential that schools seek to recognize what organizational factors may impact role ambiguity amongst their school social workers so that they can receive efficient services. The following research supports the premise that certain organizational factors impact role ambiguity amongst school social workers. In response, the following study has explored the following research question: What organizational factors increase or decrease role ambiguity?

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

A search of existing literature was conducted using EBSCOhost journal database and Google Scholar to accumulate a large body of literature on the topic of organizational factors that impact role ambiguity amongst school social workers. The search terms used within the search procedures are as follows: “school social work roles,” “role ambiguity,” “organizational factors impacting roles in social work,” and “organizational tenure impacting roles.” The literature was reviewed to establish information about role ambiguity and the organizational factors that impact role ambiguity in school social work.

Role Ambiguity

The literature does not give a set definition for *role ambiguity*, but it generally describes it as a lack of clarity in the specific responsibilities, tasks, and expectations in a given role (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970; Zellars, Perrew, & Hochwarter, 2000). The social work profession has shown to be impacted by role ambiguity. Areas within hospital social work, hospice social work, and school social work present history with this issue.

Amongst the several areas of social work, school social work shows to have a significant struggle with role ambiguity (International Federation of Social Workers, 2008; Kulys & Davis, 1986; Macdonald, 2014; Randall, 2015). Specific reasoning behind this

reality is not exactly clear. The literature discusses several issues within the profession of school social work, such as job descriptions not always stating specific requirements or being up to date with policy, responsibilities of the school social worker overlapping with other professionals, or even the historical changes within the profession experiencing a major shift in focus from individually working with families to also working amongst communities. Overall, school social workers show to consistently express their struggle with defining their roles (Agresta, 2004; Avant, 2014; Richard & Villarreal Sosa, 2014).

Organizational Factors

School social work roles show to be molded by several different factors within their organization. Many times, a school social worker serves at different levels, such as micro, mezzo, macro. These can vary from individual meetings with students, to advocating and training faculty, to addressing community needs, to talking to boards about policy change. Overall, their roles vary based on the organizational need, therefore, the factors within that organization are able to impact the ambiguity and efficiency of their role and responsibilities.

Job Description

School social workers are known for being professionals who accomplish a variety of tasks and services for marginalized populations. Due to a wide scope of tasks and responsibilities, school social workers can find themselves in a state of ambiguity or confusion when explaining their role within the school they serve. A job description provides specific responsibilities within a role as well as defines the role of the professional. Unfortunately, due to the lack of clarity in the definition of school social work, many job descriptions that are given fail to provide specific details. It is common

to see school social workers individually defining their roles within their own community. The variety in roles have also been seen to change from school to school because of the difference in need. As need fluctuates, it is common to see school social workers respond by first committing to serving the need and then identifying what skills sets would and would not be beneficial to utilize within their role (Leyba, 2009; Morrison, 2016).

Traditionally, the school social work role encompasses tasks such as individual and group counseling, school and community consultations, crisis intervention, etc. (Clark & Alvarez, 2010; Constable, 2009; Huxtable & Blyth, 2002). However, the literature is now showing a change from traditional roles to contemporary roles that encompass more of the leadership, facilitator, coordinator skills that school social workers can provide when implementing change and adopting new interventions (Avant & Lindsey, 2015). Examples of contemporary tasks are interdisciplinary team coordination, needs assessment, and program and policy development (Constable, 2009). Whether contemporary or traditional, the literature shows a consistent focus on school social workers providing services to the school that assist in alleviating academic barriers as well as empowering the students to overcome the risk factors in their own lives that impede on their academics. They do this holistically by addressing the student, school, community, and family through advocating, creating relationship, and providing services and resources related to supporting their academics (Constable, 2009; Franklin, Kim, & Tripodi, 2009; Morrison, 2016; School Social Work Association of America, 2005)

Providing support and services in all areas of a student's life is of great importance within a school social worker's role due to the risk factors that are seen

amongst the individual, peer, family, and community level of a student's life (Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Morrison, 2016). Within a school district many times one will see a school social worker organize students within three tiers representing level of need. The tiers determine whether social workers address risk factors on a school-wide (tier 1), group (tier 2), or individual level (tier 3) (Morrison, 2016). The risk factors addressed within these tiers can range from school violence, mental health, attendance, homelessness, etc.

The literature shows school social workers responding to these areas through micro and macro services. School violence has specifically been addressed through implementation of anti-bullying seminars, leading behavior intervention teams, developing incentives for good behavior, and creating interventions addressing social competence and regulation of aggressive behavior (Germain, 1999; Morrison, 2016). Handling school violence often times leads to dealing with areas of mental health. School social workers have been known to be the primary mental health providers for students struggling to cope in and out of school (Morrison, 2016).

Additional risk factors common to the population that school social workers serve are the areas of attendance and truancy. Due to the environmental aspects impacting student attendance, school social workers who desire to decrease truancy rates look for any developmental, parental, familial, socioeconomic, and/or community influences when supporting students who struggle with attending school (Teasley, 2004). School social workers respond to risk factors by providing for social and mental health needs in the school, scheduling at-home visits, referring to outside resources, and informing parents of school standards and requirements, which all vary from school to school

(Knupfer, 1999; McCullagh, 2004, as cited in Morrison, 2016; Morrison, 2016).

Location

A school's location can determine the availability of resources and funding for particular programs and services that help meet the needs within a school. The funding within a program or job is also significant to any professional role due the impact it has on the completion of tasks and responsibilities. School social workers have experienced a challenge with completing their required job responsibilities and producing productive interventions due to the decrease in school budgeting and lack of resources available (Adelman & Taylor, 2002; Gerardi, 2008, as cited in Morrison, 2016; Morrison, 2016; Ruiz, 2008, as cited in Morrison, 2016; Sweifach, 2015; Teasley, Gourdine, & Canifield, 2010, as cited in Morrison, 2016).

A school's services can directly reflect the resources available in the community as well as reflect the characteristics of the community, such as socioeconomic status or demographic background. This in turn can influence the delivery of services given to students, due to the level of need within specific locations. Therefore, when needs change, due to the variety of barriers faced within different locations, school social workers' role and responsibilities change (Caudill, 1993; Morrison, 2016).

Research also shows that being tied to more than one school can also impact the responsibilities and tasks of a school social worker. School social workers who work in more than one school and share resources with multiple schools are faced with challenges regarding building rapport with students and balancing different roles due to consistently having to limit their time on each campus and balance varying roles between schools (Avant, 2015; Morrison, 2016). Research supports this by comparing school social

workers working at only one location, who are able to focus on a specific need, to school social workers who serve at multiple locations, who have to focus less on systemic tasks due to them managing many tasks (Dupper, Rocha, Jackson, & Lodato, 2014).

Support

Support within a role determines the future of a role and the efficiency of that role. Many social work programs are supported practically through funding and advocated for by those implementing the program. Support can also be seen through accountability, encouragement, and guidance from supervisors. Positive, engaging, and clear relationships and interactions between other disciplines that work within the same organization, also, cultivates a level of support across different roles.

Funding. A school social worker often times is asked to define their position to other coworkers within their school along with assessing and tending to the specific needs within the community they serve. Balancing responsibilities that come with a heavy workload requires clear standards and support to create guidance and prevent burnout. However, the common experience that research has reflected is inconsistent standards, misunderstandings of roles, and a lack of support within schools for school social work roles. When one's role is misunderstood, it can become difficult when advocating for funding and seeking out available resources to carry out services.

Many times, school social workers find themselves in a school with a supervisor who has little understanding of their role and the benefits of their services (Demsch, O'Connor, & Friedman, 2001, as cited in Higy, Haberkorn, Pope, & Gilmore, 2012; Garrett, 2006; Morrison, 2016; Teasley et al., 2012). The ensuing misunderstanding can cause a supervisor to assign tasks that do not align with the school social worker's role,

thereby preventing full use of the professional's skill sets (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 2000; Demsch, O'Connor, & Friedman, 2001, as cited in Higy, Haberkorn, Pope, & Gilmore, 2012; Morrison, 2016). Misunderstanding of a role can also cause a supervisor to not see the value within a role and consequently prevent support for funding resources or even future positions (Demsch, O'Connor, & Friedman, 2001, as cited in Higy, Haberkorn, Pope, & Gilmore, 2012; Morrison, 2016).

School social workers work directly with clients and are able to give students consistent and intentional time when addressing issues. A lack of funding for positions prevents students from receiving services from a profession with an understanding of their population. Unfortunately, research has also shown that administrators and governing entities that supervise school social work programs and provide funding both tend to have a misunderstanding of the needs of the population served by school social workers.

As misunderstanding increases, supervisors have been seen to either view school social workers as an additional support for miscellaneous tasks, or to over-assign them with tasks that include social work-oriented tasks, tasks related to prevention, and general education work (Avant, 2015). An awareness is needed to show the benefits of school social work services to leaders within the schools. Advocating to educate those who fund and supervise school social work programs about school social worker skills and the needs they address is important and a potential way of bringing awareness (Dupper, Rocha, Jackson, & Lodato, 2014).

Amidst the ambiguity of the social work role profession, a set of standards has been created to bring clarity and guidance for the profession ethically. However, national

standards have not been established for a policy-level standard that would address school social work consistently across different states (Morrison, 2016; National Association of Social Workers, 2002; National Association of Social Workers, 2012). When compared to other human service professionals, such as psychologists and school counselors, all show to have similar models of practice across the board, which allows for evaluation of professionals to be consistent and clear (Altshuler & Webb, 2009; American School Counselor Association, 2008; National Association of School Psychologists, 2010). Unfortunately, supervision and evaluation for school social workers has been either nonexistent or inconsistent (Altshuler & Webb, 2009; Richard & Villarreal Sosa, 2014).

Research also presents arguments describing the positive and negative perspectives of creating national policy standards guiding school social work practice. The first argument presented in the literature is the belief that federal and state laws should be regulated for school social work job descriptions and practice parameters. A research study done in Louisiana used the national standard for the profession as a guideline to develop a conceptual framework that assisted in creating a model for practice. The following established a set of standards for practice, training and policies to reinforce the role of a school social worker. The argument advocated for the professional role to be seen from an ecological approach so that employers understand the holistic view of the profession and the needs it addresses (Richard & Villarreal Sosa, 2014). The second argument focuses on policy measures that have been put in place for program standards. These standards are frequently connected to a funding agreement. The negative aspect of this viewpoint is that funding agreements are known to be very strict and can be overwhelming for school social workers when working to meet program-

specific guidelines because of the connection of funding and the outcomes of their program (Kim & Stoner, 2008; Patti, 2000). Research describes the environment as “a bureaucratic work environment that deters social workers from holistically approaching their tasks since tasks and knowledge areas are narrowly defined, thereby eliminating the potential for social worker to gain control over the services they provide to clients” (Kim & Stoner, 2008, p. 21). When requirements and tasks are linked to funding, it can create a strict schedule which can deter social workers away from quality and holistic approaches to their program.

Supervision. Social support within a job is important and can be defined as “information leading the subject to believe that he is cared for and loved, esteemed, and a member of a network of mutual obligations” (Cobb, 1976, p. 300). Support comes from seeing value. If supervisors see value within school social workers, then advocating for and prioritizing program efficiency and role clarity can be practiced. Unfortunately, school social workers face obstacles with having to show their value to supervisors to invest in their services.

Studies have shown that social workers experience their supervisors’ questioning whether other professionals such as counselors already employed by the school could do the specific tasks that social workers would be assigned to do (Morrison, 2016). Not seeing a value and misunderstanding the role as mentioned before has caused school social workers to not be used at their full potential. Similarly, pushback has also been seen when school social workers are funded and are implementing change and introducing new interventions on campus. Some school social workers connect this to the culture not accepting change within their community even when given a clear

understanding of their role (Fullan, 2007; Winfrey, 2011). Unfortunately, Kotter (1996) says, “new approaches usually sink into a culture only after it’s very clear that they work and are superior to old methods” (p. 157). Even then, continually fighting pushback against change and potential misunderstanding can cause the sustainability of a program to become difficult. The only option left is for school social workers to advocate, educate about their position, and encourage examination of organizational strategies.

An increase in support within an organization has been seen through creating a supportive working environment to improve attachment within the organization. Supervisors in organizations with increased support practice communicating up and down administrative hierarchy to discuss support as well as having consistent communication with frontline school social workers on their input with supervisory experiences (Kim & Stoner, 2008). In a study where social workers were supported by their colleagues and administrators, social workers felt respected, flexible, influential, recognized, and accepted in regard to the roles, values, and perspectives of their profession. There was also a low number of professionals who experienced role ambiguity or confusion within the organizational settings that included social support (Sweifach, 2015).

Social support can be seen in research as a supportive culture with characteristics similar to the ones described in the study previously mentioned. Or it can be practically seen given through formal supervision of a professional by “providing concern, empathy (emotional support), feedback (appraisal support), advice, suggestions, directions (informational support), and giving money or assistance (instrumental support) to the employees” (House, 1981, p. 470). Research has shown the positive impact that social support has on professionals and organizational settings. It has shown to alleviate

stressful situations in organizational settings that pose the threat of work overload and burnout (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Fenlason & Beehr, 1994; Fisher, 1985; Houkes, Janssen, de Jonge, & Bakker, 2003). Studies have specifically shown that formal supervision has had positive impacts on role conflict, role ambiguity, and self-efficacy (Grissett, 2009), therefore causing supervision to be seen as a protective factor against burnout and role ambiguity (Lloyd et al., 2002). In all, school social workers either experience a lack of clarity in role requirements and duties due to their supervisor's misunderstanding or a clear role with overly strict requirements. Overall, there seems to be a consistent experience of a lack of support from supervisors.

Internal communication. Internal relationships and communication between different disciplines can impact how a role is defined and supported within a workplace. School social workers and school counselors are often mistaken for the same role within a school. However, school social workers approach students from a systems theory approach when providing resources and services to students or clients (Gianesin, 1996, as cited in Morrison, 2016; Morrison, 2016). Systems theory views the client and how they interact with individuals, organizations, groups, and communities.

Both counselors and school social workers are known for empowering students to improve in academics, attendance, etc., but school social workers specifically focus on the human behavior through systems theory (Morrison, 2016). Many times, school social workers put themselves in a position to change policy or systemic issues due the nature of addressing all systems that impact a student's life. Unfortunately, encouraging change can cause conflict and is in opposition to counselors which adhere to clearly defined expectations and educational requirements (Agresta, 2004; Altshuler & Webb, 2009).

Research supports the creation of a multidisciplinary team to provide support in all areas of need for students and alleviate confusion in job roles. Multidisciplinary teams have been commonly used within schools when addressing attendance or behavioral issues. School social workers have been seen to work with administrators, teachers, parents, and the police when putting together a team to address students with severe truancy issues. A team allows for less of a burden on the school social worker and provides support and accountability for students in all areas of life (Morrison, 2016; Newsome, Anderson-Butcher, Fink, Hall, & Huffer, 2008).

Behavior has also been addressed as a partnership between counselors and school social workers where the student gets counseling from a school counselor but then also gets checked in on by the school social workers for extra support for the student and family. This approach has helped students overcome issues they were facing (Morrison, 2016) as well as allowed for the school social work profession to move from a generic role to a more focused and specialized role (Sweifach, 2015). However, there also has been evidence of conflict when incorporating multidisciplinary teams into schools.

Conflict within multidisciplinary teams can arise due to the different disciplines having differing values, priorities, and perspectives as well as professionals struggling with clear expectations and understandings of each role (Higy, Haberkorn, Pope, & Gilmore, 2012; Reese & Sontag, 2001). Conflict within multidisciplinary teams has also been experienced by school social workers who are new to their position and are not accustomed to differing views from a majority of their colleagues. A lack of orienting them into these teams may lead to increased role ambiguity or conflict due to the competing of roles or mixing of responsibilities (Abramson, 1993; Davidson, 1990;

Jaskyte, 2005).

Supervisors who were able to prevent role blurring and role ambiguity within their school were those who supported school social workers by providing them with time to get oriented into the school and who also brought multidisciplinary teams together with clear expectations for each job roles (Abramson, 1993; Davidson, 1990; Jaskyte, 2005). Internal communication within the workplace impacts the relationships and the dynamic in which roles function. An importance is shown that those who supervise and lead internal communication and relationships can directly impact the future clarity of roles and how confident the professionals within those roles carry it out.

Employee Organizational Tenure

An employee's organizational tenure has been defined in the literature as the time an employee has spent working for an organization (Ng & Feldman, 2011; Steffens, Shemla, Wegge, & Diestel, 2014). The longer an employee works for a company or organization, the more knowledge is attained on carry you job responsibilities. Potential causes of increased knowledge include seeking feedback from supervisors or increasing communication between coworkers on how to carry out or approach tasks. Due to an understanding that growth in role identity can happen over time, organizational tenure has been seen to have a relationship with the role of a professional. Studies have found that organizational tenure is negatively related to role ambiguity (Srikanth & Jomon, 2013) and therefore suggests that as an employee continues working at an organization, their responsibilities will become clearer.

Another aspect of organizational tenure that has been mentioned in the literature focuses on the level of influence tenure has amongst a team of employees. A study

focusing on employee performance discussed benefits of working amongst diverse teams in regard to work habits, attitudes, opinions, cultures, and different levels of tenure. Teams with high tenure were seen to have significantly clearer understandings of how to carry out responsibilities within their organization (Steffens et al., 2014).

A potential benefit of working with teams and amongst professionals with varying tenure and experience is receiving an increased amount of support and feedback on how to approach tasks or issues. Increased support and feedback has shown give a clearer understanding of responsibilities within roles (McKay, Avery, & Morris, 2009). In addition to support from coworkers, support from supervisors has been shown to increase organizational tenure and provide guidance and clarity when first starting a position (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006).

An employee's organizational tenure has shown to have a relationship with role ambiguity and organizational support. However, research has also focused on how employee organizational tenure has an impact on an employee's perception of the organization they work for and his or her responses to those perceptions therefore impacting their mental health. The research done on this area of tenure suggests that newly hired employees have a low perception of challenge and/or risk in the work environment when first starting out compared to high tenured employees who showed a higher level of responsivity and perception of challenge and/or risk in work structures and procedures.

The difference in perception that is seen within varying levels of organizational tenure could potentially impact the view of oneself or job (Gavin & Greenhaus, 1976). How an employee perceives their work environment and responds can speak to how they

engage their role as an employee within their organization. Overall, level of organizational tenure has shown to have an impact on an employee's role.

Negative Consequences of Role Ambiguity

Role ambiguity has shown to cause a significant amount of negative consequences for school social workers. It is an ongoing issue and, when left unattended, can be detrimental to the services provided in schools. Role ambiguity has shown to cause specific negative consequences for school social workers, such as stress (Guterman & Jayaratne, 1994, as cited in Jaskyte, 2005; Jones, 1993; Lloyd, King & Chenoweth, 2002; Shinn, Rosario, Morch, & Chestnut, 1984). School social work, like many other helping professions, can be stressful, but when role ambiguity is an underlying factor in their position, it can naturally create considerably more stress and frustration due to the need of clarity and structure when facing uncertainty and confusion (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

There is a specific connection between role ambiguity and task-based stress. When roles become ambiguous, tasks tend to increase due to the lack in specific responsibilities. Research has contrasted the difference between setting goals for a professional and guiding a professional on how to perform task to prevent this type of task base stress. However, when role ambiguity exists it can lead to a lack in support, which can cause a lack in guidance on how to complete tasks (McGrath & Kelly, 1986).

Employee Engagement & Self-Efficacy

Due to the lack in guidance and consistent experience of stress within school social work, there is an increase in school social workers' inability to effectively do their jobs (Breugh & Colihan, 1994; Guterman & Jayaratne, 1994, as cited in Jaskyte, 2005;

Jones, 1993; Shinn, Rosario, Morch, & Chestnut, 1984). Unfortunately, this lack of support and inefficiency in job performance can cause school social workers to feel isolated and frustrated with their position as well as can onset conflict with other professionals due to the overlapping tasks within disciplines (Villarreal & McGrath, 2013). The potential of low self-efficacy and conflict in the workplace has been shown to overall cause job dissatisfaction amongst school social workers (Acker, 2004; Landsman, 2008). A supervisor is one to provide support but when there is no concrete standard given or form of evaluation then it can skew a professional view on personal accomplishment and overall self-efficacy to sustain their role (Jackson, Turner, & Brief, 1987; Richard & Villarreal Sosa, 2014; Yurur & Sarikaya, 2012).

Self-efficacy determines the effectiveness of a professional in their role and guides how an employee engages their role. In a research study done in Alabama, there was a connection between the ambiguity of a role and the perception school social workers had about their roles. The school social workers who experienced role ambiguity experienced negative consequences of low self-efficacy (Weiner, 2005).

Self-efficacy is of great importance when supporting professionals to complete tasks. However, this can vary depending on the amount of experience a professional brings to their position. The literature has shown that the more years of experience a school social worker had in their field, the less role conflict and role ambiguity existed and the more preparation and effectiveness in their work showed (Morrison, 2016; Weiner, 2005). This may be due to the strengthening of relationships within the field and the increase in time to advocate and clarify one's tasks.

Increased experience within a role can bring preparedness when first engaging tasks. Feelings of inadequacy or low self-efficacy have presented themselves when a school social worker is not prepared to take on the tasks at hand. The feeling of preparedness within a role for school social workers comes from understanding their scope of practice and having practiced responsibilities. Feelings of role ambiguity when first engaging a role can potentially be caused by school social workers' practicing outside of their scope of practice and therefore preventing effective practice (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 2000; Mumm & Bye, 2011).

Burnout

The most common negative consequence of role ambiguity is burnout (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Guterman & Jayaratne, 1994, as cited in Jaskyte, 2005; Jones, 1993; Kim & Stoner, 2008; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002; Schaufeli, 2007; Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003; Shinn, Rosario, Morch, & Chestnut, 1984; Siefert, Jayaratne, & Chess, 1991; Yurur & Sarikaya, 2012). Burnout is made up of three components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or cynicism, or diminished personal accomplishment. Many of the negative consequences mentioned previously exist or can overwhelmingly lead to burnout. For example, burnout tends to coexist within high role stress, conflict, overload (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; Söderfeldt, Söderfeldt, & Warg, 1995), lack of support, lack of self-regulatory activity, and client-related demands (Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Schaufeli, 2007; Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003). Unless role ambiguity is decreased, school social workers will be succumbed to these negative consequences.

The literature review indicates that there is still an existence of role ambiguity within school social workers. It shows the comparison of varying organizational factors that impact the role of professionals depending on if they have recently started serving or have been there for years. In addition, the organizational factors that impact a school social worker role range considerably and can reside within the complexities of worksite relationships to the simplicity of the number of resources within a school's location. Overall the consistent experience, for school social workers is the missing guidance and support to take on difficult tasks each day and the overall misunderstanding of the skill sets and beneficial services they provide when serving a school.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework was created based on the information provided by the literature review. The model visually depicting the framework is provided below in Figure 1. The following conceptual framework shows that job description, location, supervision, internal communication, and employee engagement are all factors within an organization that impact the ambiguity of a school social worker's role. It is hypothesized that when there is a lack of clarity within job descriptions, lack in resources within locations, wavering support within supervision, conflict within internal communication, and a decrease in employee engagement, then there is an increase in role ambiguity.

The model also shows that the employee's organizational tenure is viewed as a moderating variable and may impact the relationship that supervision, internal communication, and employee engagement have on role ambiguity. It is hypothesized that if the organizational tenure of a school social worker increases, then the impact that supervision, internal communication, and employee engagement has on role ambiguity

may increase. Overall, there shows to be a gap in the research when it comes to the impact of organizational factors on role ambiguity. The following conceptual framework was developed through the information provided by the literature review which was then used to develop the methodology for this study.

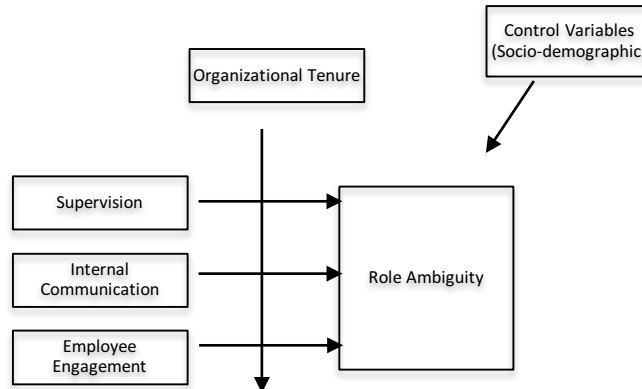


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

This leads to the following hypotheses:

- H1: School social workers who experience a low amount of fair, helpful and critical supervision will experience a high amount of role ambiguity.
- H2: School social workers who experience a low amount functionality and effective communication with peers, supervisors and other parts of the organization will experience a high amount of role ambiguity.
- H3: School social workers who experience a low amount of feelings that their ideas count, their work impacts the organization and their well-being and development is valued at the organization when engaging their role will experience a low amount of role ambiguity.

- H4: School social workers who experience an increase in organizational tenure will experience a decrease in role ambiguity.
- H5: A school social worker's organizational tenure has a moderating effect on the impact internal communication has on role ambiguity.
- H6: A school social worker's organizational tenure has a moderating effect on the impact supervision has on role ambiguity.
- H7: A school social worker's organizational tenure has a moderating effect on the impact employee engagement has on role ambiguity.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact organizational factors have on role ambiguity among school social workers. The information gained by this study provides schools with insight on potential organizational factors to be aware of when seeking to prevent role ambiguity. The study explored the following research question: What organizational factors increase or decrease role ambiguity?

Research Design and Sample

The study used a cross-sectional survey design using quantitative data of the organizational factors that are expected to impact the level of role ambiguity within the roles of school social workers. The cross-sectional study design provided a snapshot of the current organizational factors impacting school social work roles and their influence on role ambiguity within school social work positions. The limitations of this study design were shown to be connected to the limited time frame. Due to the study design being a mere snapshot of how school social workers are currently experiencing role ambiguity, there was not information on how this issue developed over time. However, the cross-sectional study design allowed for relevant and current information to be gathered on the current state of the issue and was feasible and cost effective for the time frame that was given for this study (Yegidis et al., 2012).

The study population of this study were licensed school social workers in the U.S. The sampling frame that was used to obtain a sample was a list of licensed social workers that served in schools through the United States and were members of the School Social Work Association of America. This sampling frame included 1036 licensed school social workers. Considering the study population, this is considered a convenient sampling due to the population being chosen based on accessibility and feasibility. Due to this sampling method, this study had a limitation of low external validity due to the lack of representation in the sample (Yegidis et al., 2012). The response rate was 7% with 73 participants completing the survey, 57 with invalid emails, and 906 who did not respond.

Data Collection

The School Social Work Association of America provided a list of email addresses of all the members of the School Social Work Association of America. The researcher sent an invitation email to all members with an introduction of the study and a link to the online survey. When the participant was directed to the online survey site, an informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the survey. Respondents provided consent by checking the box of consent to continue the survey. The informed consent form can be found in Appendix B. The online survey consisted of 35 questions and would take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete through the use of a Google Doc form. To confirm that all the data collected was not individually identifiable, all the surveys received by the school social workers who participated were de-identified and coded. An application of this study was submitted to the Abilene Christian University's Institutional Review Board for approval as a human research study (Appendix A).

Organizational Factors

The independent variables (IVs) in this study were organizational factors, measured by questions from the Survey of Employee Engagement (SEE) and questions written by the researcher related to location of services. The SEE was constructed by the Institute for Organizational Excellence at the University of Texas at Austin. The 16 questions chosen from the SEE specifically dealt with fundamental aspects of how an organization functions and were used to measure the organizational factors that impact the role of school social workers for this study: supervision, internal communication, and employee engagement. Each item was measured on a five-point scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Once the 16 SEE questions were scored, the questions that were similar to each other were grouped together and averaged to produce specific construct measures (Department of Family and Protective Services, 2016). The three location questions specifically dealt with characteristics related to location of services and resources provided. Once location questions were collected, they were analyzed for significant figures.

Supervision. The supervision section “captured perceptions of the nature of supervisory relationships within the organization” and “measured the degree to which employees viewed their supervisors as fair, helpful and critical to the workflow” (Department of Family and Protective Services, 2016, p. E2).

Internal communication. The internal communication section “captured employees’ perceptions of whether communication in the organization was reasonable, candid and helpful” and “measured the degree to which employees viewed

communication with peers, supervisors and other parts of the organization as functional and effective” (Department of Family and Protective Services, 2016, p. E3).

Employee engagement. The employee engagement section “captured the degree to which employees were willing to go above and beyond, feel committed to the organization and were present while working” and “measured the degree to which employees felt that their ideas counted, their work impacted the organization and their well-being and development was valued at the organization” (Department of Family and Protective Services, 2016, p. E5).

Ambiguity

The dependent variable (DV) in this study was role ambiguity. When determining instruments to use to measure role ambiguity, the Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) scale was taken into consideration but was shown to be a questionable instrument by several researchers, due to its psychometric deficiencies and global nature. This has led researchers to develop a scale that measures the different facets of ambiguity that have shown to be particularly important. During the process of development, the scale went through several revisions through the use of literature recommendations, comments and edits from colleagues, and rewording to prevent covariance. Once developed, researchers then determined the reliability and psychometric properties of the three-factor job ambiguity scale by administering four separate studies. The results of the four studies showed that the three-factor job ambiguity model provided an excellent fit to the data (Breugh & Colihan, 1994).

The three-factor job ambiguity items scale is composed of a nine-item scale measuring the facets of job ambiguity. The different facets of job ambiguity utilized were

work method ambiguity, scheduling ambiguity, and performance criteria ambiguity. The items were ranked on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7) (Breaugh & Colihan, 1994). The questions within this survey were written out inversely, indicating levels of role clarity. In order to for the answers to reflect the levels of ambiguity within each facet, each item should have been analyzed inversely. Due to limited time provided for statistical analysis, the researcher was not able to address this measurement issue, and therefore chose to utilize the term initially ranked in the scale and referenced throughout the results, “job clarity.”

Demographic Information

Participants were asked six basic demographic questions at the introduction of the survey that included gender, race, age, credentials (i.e., LBSW, LBSSW, LMSW, LMSSW), overall job experience as a school social worker, and organizational tenure.

Control Variables

In addition to the demographic information, some organizational factors that are not a part of the hypotheses were also measured. For example, employee development was measured by combining the answer of the following two questions, “training is made available to me so that I can do my job better” (TrainingJob) and “training is made available to me for personal growth and development” (TrainingDevelopment).

Statistical Analysis

After collecting data, descriptive analyses were conducted to examine the sample characteristics and any patterns that might be found across different groups. Multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to examine which organizational factors

impact role ambiguity as well as the level of impact the organizational factors have on role ambiguity after controlling for the demographic information.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Participants

Table 1 shows the detailed information of the participants' demographic background. The study participants were members of the School Social Work Association of America. The descriptive statistics showed that the nine male participants accounted for 12.3% of the total, with 64 female participants comprising 87.7%. The median age of participants was 44.01 with a standard deviation of 10.63. The average organizational tenure showed to be 3 years with an average of 4 years of overall experience as a school social worker. The largest groups in terms of ethnicity was "non-Hispanic, White," with a total number of 58, comprising of 79.5%.

Table 1

Characteristics of the Sample (N =73)

Variable	Category or Range	<i>N or M</i>	<i>% or SD</i>
Gender	Female	64	87.7
	Male	9	12.3
Ethnicity	NH, White	58	79.5
	NH, African American	6	8.2
	NH, Other	1	1.4
	Hispanic (Any)	7	9.6
	Prefer not to say	1	1.4
Age	27-71	44.01	10.63
ExperienceSSW	1-5	4.10	1.23
OrganizationalTenure	1-5	3.33	1.50

Internal Consistency of the Scales

The present study includes the following measurement scales: Job Ambiguity Items and the Survey of Employee Engagement. As a step in preliminary analyses, a series of reliability analyses were done for each measurement scale to examine and rank the internal consistency within each scale from low to high. “The internal consistency indicates the extent to which all the items or indicators measure the same construct and the inter-relatedness of the items with each other” (Tavakol, & Dennick, 2011, p. 53).

Cronbach’s alpha is a widely used tool for assessing the internal consistency of a scale. This value refers to "the extent that correlations among items in a domain vary, there is some error connected with the average correlation found in any particular sampling of items" (Nunnally, 1978, p. 206). An argument presented by Nunnally (1978) states a widely used cut-off value of equal or higher than .70 to be indicative of a minimally adequate internal consistency. The following section provides information including what indicators were included in each scale and its Cronbach’s alpha.

Job Clarity on Method

As noted in Table 2, a subscale (Method) of job clarity exhibited high internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .914$). Therefore, the scores on the three items were averaged to generate a composite value to measure ClarityMethod as Breugh and Colihan (1994) suggested.

Table 2

Internal Consistency of Job ClarityMethod (N= 73)

Indicator ($\alpha=.914$)	Mean	α Without
ClarityMethod1 I am certain how to go about getting my job done (the methods to use).	5.63	.876
ClarityMethod2 I know what is the best way (approach) to go about getting my work done.	5.73	.852
ClarityMethod3 I know how to get my work done (what procedures to use).	5.85	.897

Job Clarity on Schedule

As noted in Table 3, a subscale (Scheduling) of job clarity exhibited high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .929$). Therefore, the scores on the three items were averaged to generate a composite value to measure ClarityScheduling as Breugh and Colihan (1994) suggested.

Table 3

Internal Consistency of Job ClarityScheduling (N= 73)

Indicator ($\alpha=.929$)	Mean	α Without
ClarityScheduling1 I know when I should be doing a particular aspect (part) of my job.	5.51	.899
ClarityScheduling2 I am certain about the sequencing of my work activities (when to do what).	5.40	.845
ClarityScheduling3 My job is such that I know when I should be doing a given work activity.	5.34	.949

Job Clarity on Criteria

As noted in Table 4, a subscale (Criteria) of job clarity exhibited high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .975$). Therefore, the scores on the three items were

averaged to generate a composite value to measure ClarityCriteria as Breugh and Colihan (1994) suggested.

Table 4

Internal Consistency of Job ClarityCriteria (N= 73)

Indicator ($\alpha=.975$)	Mean	α Without
ClarityCriteria1 I know what my supervisor considers satisfactory work performance.	5.10	.961
ClarityCriteria2 It is clear to me what is considered acceptable performance by my supervisor.	4.93	.971
ClarityCriteria3 I know what level of performance is considered acceptable by my supervisor.	5.03	.958

Overall Job Clarity

As noted in Table 5, a subscale (Overall) of job clarity exhibited a moderate level internal consistency (Cochbach’s $\alpha = .687$). Therefore, the scores on the three items were averaged to generate a composite value to measure ClarityOverall, which analyzes the previous 3 subscales, as Breugh and Colihan (1994) suggested.

Table 5

Internal Consistency of Job ClarityOverall (N= 73)

Indicator ($\alpha=.687$)	Mean	α Without
ClarityMethodMean	5.74	.509
ClaritySchedulingMean	5.42	.451
ClarityCriteriaMean	5.02	.843

Employee Engagement

As noted in Table 6, a subscale of employee engagement exhibited low internal consistency (Cochbach’s $\alpha = .564$). The measurement of EmployeeEngagement developed by the Institute for Organizational Excellence at the University of Texas at

Austin cited in Department of Family and Protective Services (2016) includes twelve indicators. The low alpha level may be resulted because the researcher selected specific indicators of this construct, which is considered to be related to the outcome variable (i.e., job ambiguity). The researcher generated a composite value by averaging the scores on the three times, acknowledging this measurement error would influence he results of other analyses.

Table 6

Internal Consistency of EmployeeEngagement (N= 73)

Indicator ($\alpha=.564$)	Mean	α Without
EmployeeEngagement1 I know how my work impacts others in the organization.	4.01	.865
EmployeeEngagement2 The people I work with care about my personal well-being.	3.92	.084
EmployeeEngagement3 I trust the people in my workplace.	3.63	.003

Internal Communication

As noted in Table 7, a subscale of internal communication exhibited fairly high internal consistency (Crochbach’s $\alpha = .862$). The measurement of InternalCommunication developed by the Institute of Organizational Excellence at the University of Texas at Austin cited in Department of Family and Protective Services (2016) includes three indicators. The fairly high alpha level may be resulted because the researcher utilized all three indicators of this construct, which is considered to be related to the outcome variable (i.e., job ambiguity). The researcher developed a composite value by averaging the scores on the three items.

Table 7

Internal Consistency of Internal Communication (N= 73)

Indicator ($\alpha=.862$)	Mean	α Without
InternalCommunication1 The communication channels I must go through at work are reasonable.	3.26	.772
InternalCommunication2 My work atmosphere encourages open and honest communication.	3.23	.873
InternalCommunication3 The communications I receive at work are timely and informative.	3.16	.775

Supervision

As noted in Table 8, a subscale of supervision exhibited fairly high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .885$). The measurement of Supervision developed by the Institute for Organizational Excellence at the University of Texas at Austin cited in Department of Family and Protective Services (2016) includes five indicators. The fairly high alpha level may be resulted because the researcher utilized all five indicators of this construct, which is considered to be related to the outcome variable (i.e., job ambiguity). The researcher developed a composite value by averaging the scores on the five items.

Table 8

Internal Consistency of Supervision (N= 73)

Indicator ($\alpha=.885$)	Mean	α Without
Supervision1 My supervisor provides me with a clear understanding of my work responsibilities.	2.93	.872
Supervision2 My supervisor recognizes outstanding work.	3.47	.863
Supervision3 I am given the opportunity to do my best work.	3.63	.862
Supervision4 My supervisor is consistent when administering policies concerning employees.	3.30	.847
Supervision5 My supervisor evaluates my performance fairly.	3.67	.856

Descriptive Statistics of Major Variables

Job Clarity

School social workers were asked to present their perception about their job ambiguity through questions that ranked job clarity. Due to job ambiguity being measured in this way it is viewed as an inverse metric and referred to as job clarity in the results. Job clarity was measured in three sub-sections: Method, Scheduling, and Criteria. In order to measure the overall job clarity, the mean score of the sub scores were used. Table 9 shows that the mean for ClarityOverall was 5.39 with a standard deviation of 1.07.

Table 9

Descriptive Statistics of Job Clarity (N=73)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SK</i>	<i>KT</i>
ClarityMethodMean	5.74	1.06	-1.26	2.43
ClaritySchedulingMean	5.42	1.30	-0.97	0.26
ClarityCriteriaMean	5.02	1.66	-0.80	-0.31
ClarityOverallMean	5.39	1.07	-0.91	1.01

Scale: 1= disagree strongly, 2= disagree, 3= disagree slightly, 4= neutral, 5= agree slightly, 6= agree, and 7= agree strongly

Note. SK: Skewness, KT: Kurtosis.

Workplace Characteristics

Organizational factors were measured using a location survey and the Survey of Employee Engagement. The Survey of Employee Engagement was used to measure Internal Communication, Supervision, and Employee Engagement with measurements ranging from 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree), to 5 (strongly agree). Data on organizational factor rankings can be seen in Table 10. The specific factors measured by the Survey of Employee Engagement ranked moderately with a

mean between 3 and 4 and with no specific factor ranking overwhelmingly higher or lower than the rest. Furthermore, the location survey was used to collect data on location description, job description clarity, and available resources. The majority of participants, 62 (84.9%), categorized their region as “suburban” but differed more when asked about receiving a clear job description. Job description percentages found that 31 (42.5%) participants felt they received a clear job description while 42 (57.5%) felt they did not receive a clear job description.

Table 10

Organizational Factors (N=73)

Variable	Category or Range	<i>N or M</i>	<i>% or SD</i>
Region	Suburban	62	84.9%
	Not suburban	11	15.1%
Job Description (Clear)	Yes	31	42.5%
	No	42	57.5%
Organizational Resources	1-5	3.32	1.04
Employee Development	1-5	3.46	1.08
Communication (Internal)	1-5	3.22	0.93
Supervision	1-5	3.40	0.93
Employee Engagement	2-5	3.85	0.65

Scale: 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree

Hypothesis Testing

A multiple regression analysis was performed to test the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: School social workers who experience a low amount of fair, helpful and critical supervision will experience a high amount of role ambiguity.
- Hypothesis 2: School social workers who experience a low amount functionality and effective communication with peers, supervisors and other parts of the organization will experience a high amount of role ambiguity.

- Hypothesis 3: School social workers who experience a low amount of feelings that their ideas count, their work impacts the organization and their well-being and development is valued at the organization when engaging their role will experience a low amount of role ambiguity.
- Hypothesis 4: School social workers who experience an increase in organizational tenure will experience a decrease in role ambiguity.
- Hypothesis 5: A school social worker's organizational tenure has a moderating effect on the impact internal communication has on role ambiguity.
- Hypothesis 6: A school social worker's organizational tenure has a moderating effect on the impact supervision has on role ambiguity.
- Hypothesis 7: A school social worker's organizational tenure has a moderating effect on the impact employee engagement has on role ambiguity.

Before testing the hypotheses, assumptions for testing a regression model were considered using Field's recommendation (2013). Multicollinearity problems (i.e., a high correlation between factors) were examined using the tolerance value for predictors (less than 0.2) or variance inflation factor (VIF) (10 or above). Since the regression model that includes factors did not reveal any multicollinearity, all factors were included in the regression model. In addition, assumptions of normality of errors and linear regression were investigated. The examination of residual plots is considered a preferable method of detection for the assumptions for linear regression including linearity and homoscedasticity (Field, 2013). The residual plot in Figure 2 indicates the assumptions were considered met.

The initial regression analysis of the research model yielded no moderating effect. Hypotheses 4 through 7 were not supported. The researcher made a decision to make some changes in the research model by replacing ‘Organizational Tenure’ with ‘Job Experience’ because they seem to have some conceptual similarity. The revised regression model yielded more meaningful information. Therefore, the results of this model are presented below.

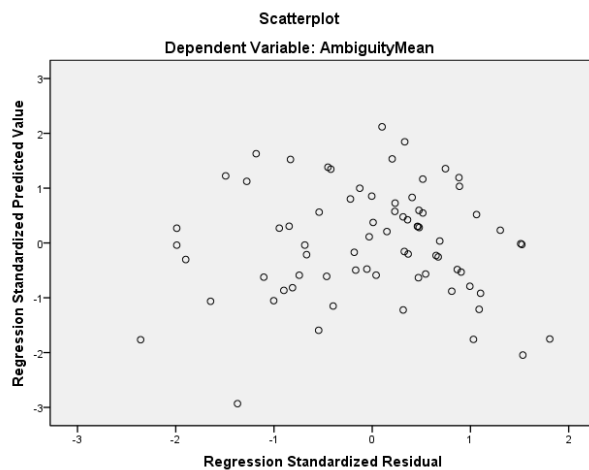


Figure 2. Residual plot

Table 11 presents the results of a direct model that includes only organizational factors. Table 12 shows bivariate correlations among predictors included in the revised regression model. This model significantly statistically explained the variance of the outcome variable (Job Clarity). The results indicate that the overall regression model was statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.454$, $F = 5.148$, $p < .001$) explaining the variance in depression by 45.4%. The ‘direct model’ presents the results of testing the effect of factors before the inclusion of interaction terms (hypotheses 1 through 4). In this model, only two factors were significant: Supervision and Job Experiences. Hypothesis 1 was supported while hypothesis 2, 3 were not. Hypothesis 4 was supported when the

moderating variable (Organizational Tenure) was replaced with a new moderating variable (Job Experience), as mentioned previously.

Table 11

Direct Multiple Linear Regression (MLR) Model of Job Clarity (N=73)

Category	Factor	<i>beta</i>	<i>t</i>
Demographic	Female	.053	.527
	Age	.091	.766
Covariates	Suburban	-.007	-.066
	Clear Job Description	.064	.613
	Organizational Resources	.119	1.112
	Employee Development	.132	1.200
Of interest	Communication	.040	.270
	Supervision	.514	3.424**
	Employee Engagement	-.107	-.787
	Job Experience	.250	2.170*
			$\Delta R^2 = .454^{***}$

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 12

Bivariate Correlations among Predictors Included in the direct MLR

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 JobClarity	1.000										
2 Female	.059	1.000									
3 Age	.073	-.272	1.000								
4 Suburban	-.054	.041	-.062	1.000							
5 JobDescription	.231	.184	-.122	-.258	1.000						
6 Resources	.289	-.007	-.124	.094	.155	1.000					
7 EmployDevelop	.380	-.014	-.033	-.253	.148	.242	1.000				
8 Communication	.368	.074	-.310	.011	.243	.415	.205	1.000			
9 Supervision	.570	.081	-.216	-.074	.311	.338	.383	.698	1.000		
10 Engagement	.340	-.042	-.200	-.160	.276	.307	.310	.610	.644	1.000	
11 ExperienceSSW	.290	-.107	.495	.061	-.046	-.068	.161	-.132	.005	.064	1.000

Note. Significant relationships between two continuous variables indicated by bold font

The hypotheses 5, 6 and 7 were tested after the initial moderating variable (Organizational Tenure) was replaced with a new moderating variable, Job Experience.

These hypotheses included the interaction terms between three factors (Communication,

Supervision, and Employee Engagement) and Job Experience in the ‘Moderating Model.’” In order to test the moderating effect of Job Experience, the present study used the approach used in a study (Dardas & Ahmad, 2015). A separate set of regression analyses was used for each of the organizational factors (Communication, Supervision, and Engagement) that were expected to be influenced by the moderator (Job Experience).

Moderation was examined by constructing three hierarchical regression equations for each regression model tests the moderating effect of the moderator (Job Experience). Each regression model included the outcome variable (Job Clarity), factors and a multiplicative term representing the interaction between each of the organizational factor and the moderator. Table 13 demonstrates the results of each regression model. The results of the direct models that were estimated before including the interaction terms also presented in this table in order to examine what the moderator influenced the impact of each factor on the outcome variable. Other covariates were excluded for simplicity.

Table 13

Moderating Effect of Experiences in School Social Work in MLR¹ (N= 73)

Model #	Factor	Direct Model		Moderating Model		<i>R</i> ² of the moderator
		<i>beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>beta</i>	<i>t</i>	
1	Communication	.040	.270	1.007	2.752**	
1	Job Experience	.250	2.170*	1.278	3.402**	
2	COMMxEXP			-1.323	-2.859**	.065**
3	Supervision	.514	3.424**	1.263	3.984***	
3	Job Experience	.250	2.170*	1.178	3.208**	
4	SUPxEXP			-1.238	-2.649*	.056*
5	Engagement	-.107	-.787	.358	.995	
5	Job Experience	.250	2.170*	1.042	1.797	
6	ENGxEXP			-.949	-1.393	.017

Note. ¹ All regression models included the following covariates (*Female, Age, Suburban, Clear Job Description, and Organizational Resources*).

* *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001

Hypothesis 5 was tested by including the interaction term of Communication and Job Experience (i.e., *COMxEXP*). The moderating effect was statistically significant (beta = -1.323, $t = -2.859$, $p = .006$). By adding the interaction terms to the Direct Model (Model 1), the Interaction Model (Model 2) explained the variance of Job Clarity more by 6.5%. In order to examine the moderating effect visually so that we can see whether the moderating variable plays amplifying or buffering the impact of the factor on the outcome, PROCESS 3.0 created by Andrew F. Hayes (2019) was used by using a simple moderating model (including only three variables involved). The PROCESS used the recommended procedure for testing moderating effect, which is centering the factors and the moderator to maximize interpretability and minimize potential problems with multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991).

Figure 3 visually presents that Job Experience moderated the relationship between Communication and Job Clarity. Although this figure changes the role of the factor and the moderator, the relationships were presented in this way because it proposes more practical implications. There is not much organizations can do about the lack of job experience. On the other hand, this research recommends the improvement of communication for less experienced practitioners. The following recommendation is assumed due to the graph depicting the varying slopes of job experience over time. In other words, job experience showed to have less of a moderating impact on the relationship of communication on role ambiguity over time.

The dotted line (Line 1) represents a group with shorter job experience, the solid line (Line 2) the average level of communication, and the solid bold line (Line 3) longer job experiences. The slope for the lower level of communication group is positive and

steeper. The significant moderating effect ($\beta = -1.323, t = -2.859, p = .006$) suggests that the difference in the slope for these groups was statistically significant. Line 1 shows that for the group of participants who had less job experience in school social work, having better communication was helpful for job clarity. On the other hand, Line 3 shows that for the group of social workers who had a high level of experience, the impact of having better communication on job clarity was positive but was smaller than the group with less experience.

Due to job ambiguity being measured with job clarity, it is viewed as an inverse metric. When viewing the relationships between variables in regard to ambiguity, the figure can be looked at inversely. Therefore, when clarity is high, ambiguity is low and when clarity is low, ambiguity is high.

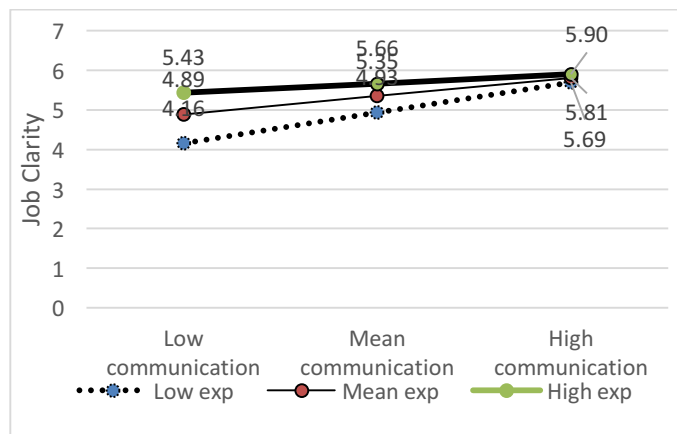


Figure 3. Moderating effect of communication between experience in school social work and job clarity.

Hypothesis 6 was tested by including the interaction term of Supervision and Job Experience (i.e., $SUP \times EXP$). The moderating effect was statistically significant ($\beta = -1.238, t = -2.649, p = .006$). By adding the interaction terms to the Direct Model (Model 3), the Interaction Model (Model 4) explained the variance of Job Clarity more by 5.6%.

Figure 4 shows that Job Experience moderated the relationship between Supervision and Job Clarity.

The dotted line (Line 1) represents shorter job experience; the solid line (Line 2) the average level of job experience, and the solid bold line (Line 3) longer job experience. The slope for the lower experience group is positive and steeper. The significant moderating effect indicates that the difference in the slope was statistically significant. Line 1 shows that for the group of social workers who had shorter job experience, having better supervision was helpful for job clarity. On the other hand, the Line 3 shows that for the group of social workers who had longer job experience, the impact of having better supervision on job clarity was positive but was smaller than the group with shorter experience. The varying slopes show that job experience had less of a moderating impact on the relationship of supervision on role ambiguity over time.

Due to job ambiguity being measured with job clarity, it is viewed as an inverse metric. When viewing the relationships between variables in regard to ambiguity, the figure can be looked at inversely. Therefore, when clarity is high, ambiguity is low and when clarity is low, ambiguity is high.

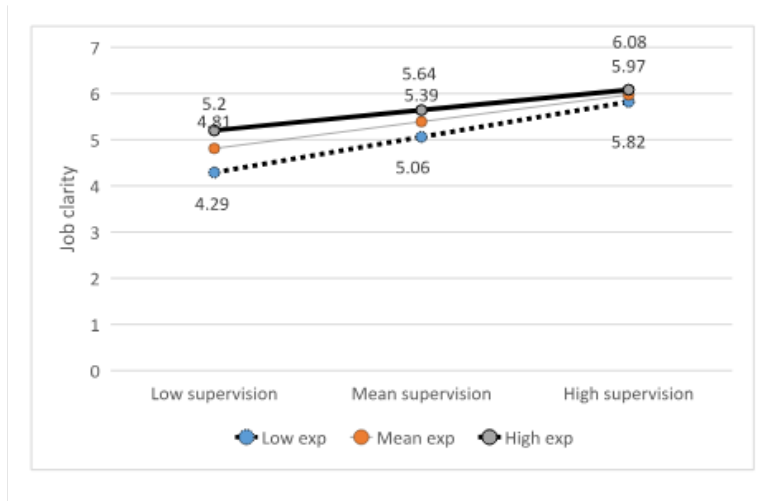


Figure 4. Moderating effect of supervision between experience in school social work and job clarity.

Hypotheses 7 was tested by including the interaction term of Employee Engagement and Job Experience (i.e., *ENGxEXP*). The moderating effect of Job Experience was not statistically significant ($\beta = -.949$, $t = -1.393$, $p = .169$). It means that the impact of Engagement on Job Clarity did not change depending on how long they have worked as a school social worker. By adding the interaction terms to the Direct Model (Model 5), the Interaction Model (Model 6) explained the variance of Job Clarity more by 1.7%, which was not statistically significant.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

School social workers often find themselves balancing many responsibilities when serving within a school, which can cause a lack of clarity when understanding their role. Due to the nature of the profession being ambiguous, it is common for other professionals within a school setting to also misunderstand the role of school social workers. A majority of research on role ambiguity focuses on the negative consequences of role ambiguity, such as burn out, but have not shown the relationship that potential organizational factors have on role ambiguity. The purpose of this study is to show the potential organizational factors that may impact the role ambiguity of school social workers so that schools can support the role of a school social worker and grow in their understanding of the role and empower efficient services. This study has explored the following research question: What organizational factors increase or decrease role ambiguity? The method used to investigate the following question was a cross-sectional survey design using quantitative data. The design provided a snapshot of the current organizational factors impacting school social work roles and their influence on role ambiguity.

Discussion of Major Findings

The sample size of the study was a majority female and classified as non-Hispanic, White. A majority of the participants worked in a suburban location and a little over half said they were not given a clear job description. The average amount of years

working within the same school was said to be three years with an average overall job experience being surprisingly low at four years.

The results of the study showed that all school social workers who participated in the study “agree slightly” that their role was clear in regard to methods of carrying out responsibilities, awareness of scheduling responsibilities out, and criteria when evaluating performance of responsibilities (role ambiguity was measured with role clarity and was therefore viewed as an inverse metric). Amidst the fairly high averages within their own understanding of the role, the perception of organizational factors differed. The three organizational factors; employee engagement, internal communication, and supervision all averaged between 3, (slightly disagree) and 4, (neutral), showing a differing view leaning more towards neutral and disagreement of support in regard to a variety areas of the organization that were experienced.

Next, the hypotheses were tested, which showed the relationship between organizational factors and role clarity as well as the moderating variable impacting the relationship of role clarity and the organizational factors. It is important to note that the initial moderating factor (Organizational Tenure) that was hypothesized to impact the relationships between variables had no moderating effect when tested, causing hypotheses 4-7 to have no support. Taking that into consideration, the researcher decided to make changes to the research model and replace the moderating variable with ‘Job Experience’ because they seemed to have conceptual similarity. Therefore, when the first hypotheses were done, the factors that showed to have a significant relationship with role clarity were supervision and job experience, therefore, supporting hypotheses 1 and 4. When the new moderating variable was tested, it showed to have a significant effect on

the relationship between role clarity and internal communication as well as the relationship between role clarity and supervision. Both relationships indicated that the school social workers who had less job experience, having high quality of supervision and internal communication was helpful for job clarity. Those with a high level of job experience, having a high quality of supervision and internal communication was helpful for job clarity but was smaller when compared to those with less experience. On the contrary, the moderating variable did not have a statistically significant effect on the impact employee engagement had on role clarity.

Understanding the impact organizational factors have on role ambiguity is important. A research study done on social workers showed that those who were supported by their colleagues and administrators felt respected, flexible, influential, recognized, and accepted in regard to the roles, values, and perspective of their profession. There was also a low number of professionals within this study who experienced role ambiguity and confusion within the organizational setting (Sweifach, 2015). Additional studies showed that supervisors who were able to prevent role blurring and role ambiguity within their school were those who supported school social workers through providing intentional guidance and orientation into a school as well as implementing a multidisciplinary team with clear expectations for job roles (Abramson, 1993; Davidson, 1990; Jaskyte, 2005).

Implications for Practice

When reviewing the findings, a majority of the participants reported to “slightly agree” that each aspect of their job (method, scheduling, and criteria) was clear. This result came off surprising due to the significant amount of research recognizing a

consistent factor of ambiguity within school social work roles (International Federation of Social Workers, 2008; Kulys & Davis, 1986; MacDonald, 2014; Randall, 2015). However, when reviewing the organizational tenure of the school social workers that participated in the study, the average amount of years they had been serving at their current school was three years. The amount of years may have impacted how they answered questions on the clarity of their role. Answers may have changed if the participants were asked to rank their perception of clarity in regard to when they first started the position compared to their current perception years later.

In addition, about 57% of them answered to not having a clear job description, which may also support this notion. In response to organizational factors, the results reported that the participants ranged from “slightly disagreeing” to “neutral” when ranking support experienced within a variety of organizational factors. It is important to recognize the perception the participants had on the organizational factors because school social workers are said to be the “change agents” on campus and are commonly known to engage with every area of a school, be it administration, teachers, or students. Recognizing that the participants slightly disagreed that levels of trust, quality of communication, and understanding of levels of performance were effective is concerning when those areas of an organization play a significant role in effectively carrying out school social work services.

After reviewing the survey answers and understanding the perceptions school social workers had on their role clarity and organizational factors, correlations between the two were ranked. The only significant factors were that of supervision’s impact on role clarity and job experience’s impact on role clarity. The supervision section of the

survey reported one of the lowest responses. The average response for a school social worker's supervisor providing clear understandings of their responsibilities fell between "disagree" and "slightly disagree". The following result is important because it shows that supervision impacts the level of clarity that was perceived, which indicates how critical a supervisor's guidance is when understanding how to carry out responsibilities within a role.

Job experience was brought in later in the study as a new moderating variable and showed to also have a significant impact on role clarity. As a school social worker increases in the years they practice they become more familiar with how to carry out common responsibilities within their profession and therefore become more prepared and effective when approaching tasks (Morrison, 2016; Weiner, 2005). It is logical to think that as job experience increases role clarity increases (ambiguity decreases) due to the level of preparedness and familiarity gained as a school social worker through the years they practice.

The results go on to show that job experience had a significant moderating effect on internal communication and supervision. School social workers who had less experience found internal communication and supervision to be more helpful for job clarity. The relationship shown is important because it supports the notion that school social workers who are early in their career may need more support within the internal communication and supervision of their organization. Employee engagement, however, dealt more with the relational aspect (wellbeing, impact, and trust) of a school social worker's role and the impact of engagement on job clarity did not show change depending on how much experience the school social worker had. This is important to

note because it recognizes that no matter the experience a professional has, there is still a process of adjusting to the culture within a school. This can also speak towards the barriers of the culture of a school (Fullan, 2007; Winfrey 2011) and the time it may take to recognize the impact one is making and whether one feels valued (Morrison, 2016).

In addition, it is important to recognize the impact that internal communication and supervision had on a school social worker's role and the relationship it had as experience increased. Both factors, internal communication and supervision, encompass the engagement that occurs between school social workers and other professionals. The following findings speak to practice in that it brings awareness to supervisors and other professionals within the schools of the need of engagement when supporting a school social worker and the services that are being brought in by school social work programs. The strengthening of engagement between supervision and internal communication may stem from the utilization and introduction of multidisciplinary teams (Morrison, 2016; Newsome, Anderson-Butcher, Fink, Hall, & Huffer, 2008) or interprofessional education within schools.

Implications for Policy

Standards for the social work profession are found within the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics. Unfortunately, there are no guidelines for the supervision and evaluation of school social workers (Altshuler & Webb, 2009; Richard & Villarreal Sosa, 2014). However, a study done in Louisiana (Richard & Villarreal Sosa, 2014) utilized ethical codes to guide conceptual framework to provide guidance for this gap, which established a set of standards for practice, training, and policies to reinforce the role of a school social worker. The argument advocated for the

professional role to be seen from an ecological approach so that employers understand the holistic view of the profession and the needs it addresses. The study mentioned, is a great example for school social workers and their supervisors who are in need of policy or guidance for school social work roles and responsibilities.

In addition to this implication is the possible change of how multiple disciplines engage within practice. Interprofessional practice has been utilized within the health care field as a way to promote collaborative interactions between professionals (WHO, 2007). School social workers may have had exposure to similar tools used such as multidisciplinary teams addressing needs on campus or resource coalitions coming together to provide resources for a client within the community. Creating a policy where professionals have to meet a standard of practice that requires supportive engagement may close the gap of misunderstanding and conflict within roles.

Implications for Research

The limitations present within this study were those related to sample size, instruments used, and time frame of the study. The sample size was significantly small due to the low response rate. It also had a low generalizability due to the results representing a narrow population of school social workers. In regard to instruments, the employee engagement construct used within the organizational factors survey showed to have a low internal consistency and alpha level due to the researcher only utilizing specific indicators from the original survey construct. Lastly, the time frame of the survey was a “snap shot” survey which provides information on the issue at a given time. Unfortunately, this does not show how the issues that were studied can develop over time.

In future studies, the research should include questions that focus on how role ambiguity was perceived throughout a school social workers time spent at a school so that it can provide a more thorough understanding of their experience with ambiguity. In addition, including open ended questions on their perception of how organizational factors impact role can provide insight on how they relate their role to their engagement with their organization. The professionals who engage with school social workers can have an impact on a school social worker's role and services provided so it would be interesting to study the perceptions of other professionals when asked about a school social worker's role.

Conclusion

Role ambiguity has become a common issue and though ambiguity is a normal part of any social work profession it is important to understand the purpose of an employee's role and the skills that are offered when welcoming that profession into an organization. School social workers are developers, educators, advocates, case managers, coordinators, counselors, and many more things but they are overall built to address needs and serve the marginalized. They are of a great resource to communities and schools and the populations that are in need within them. They take on a significant amount of work and require support and a level of understanding and guidance to effectively create change on a school campus. It is of great importance for leaders within a school to not only have an understanding of a school social worker's potential role but also understand the factors within their organization that significantly impact that role.

The helping professions are known for experiencing burnout, but when provided with an intentional support system, they are able to effectively provide long-term services. Understanding how the internal intricacies of an organization such as internal

communication and supervision of employees can directly impact the clarity or ambiguity of one's role is of great importance when preparing for a school social worker. Also, understanding how a school social worker's number of years of experience in their field can have a moderating effect on how organizational factors impact the clarity of their role is important to consider when hiring on an individual for a developing school social work role. Overall, the level of ambiguity of a role shows to fall into the hands of both the school social worker and organization.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885



April 2, 2019

Melissa Kichura

Department of Social Work

ACU Box 27866

Dear Melissa,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled

The impact organizational factors have on role ambiguity amongst school social workers

(IRB# 18-019) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

Introduction

As a School Social Worker, you are invited to participate in this study that examines the impact organizational factors have on role ambiguity among school social workers. You will be asked to rate different aspects of how your organization functions related to internal communication, supervision, employee engagement and location, as well as rate different facets of ambiguity related to work method, scheduling, and performance criteria. This research is designed to see what organizational factors increase or decrease role ambiguity. The data you provide will provide schools with insight on potential organizational factors to be aware of when seeking to prevent role ambiguity.

The research will be conducted by Melissa Kichura, a social work graduate student and school case manager intern at Abilene Christian University.

Once you consent to participation in the study, you will be asked to participate in the following procedures:

- Completion of a one-time survey over the course of spring 2018 semester. The survey will consist of 35 questions and is expected to take 10-15 minutes to complete.
- No identifying information will be disclosed or used. You will be anonymous and all information will be de-identified.

Consent

Risks and Discomforts

The primary risk with this study is breach of confidentiality, which is a minimal risk. However, we have taken steps to minimize this risk. We will not be collecting any personal identification data during the survey.

Potential Benefits

There are potential risks to participating in this study. Such benefits may include an increased awareness of organizational factors that impact school social workers, how those may have an impact on role/job ambiguity. The researchers cannot guarantee that you will experience any personal benefits from participating in this study. However, the researchers hope that the information learned from this study will help others in similar situations in the future.

Provisions for Confidentiality

Information collected about you will be handled in a confidential manner in accordance with the law. Some identifiable data may have to be shared with individuals outside of the study team, such as members of the ACU Institutional Review Board. Aside from these required disclosures, your confidentiality will be protected by de-identifying

surveys and coding data collection. Also, all data collection will be protected through the use of password protected documents.

Contact

You may ask any questions that you have at this time. However, if you have additional questions, concerns, or complaints in the future, you may contact the Principal Investigator of this study. The Principal Investigator is Melissa Kichura and may be contacted at mxk11c@acu.edu.

If you are unable to reach the Principal Investigator or wish to speak to someone other than the Principal Investigator, you may contact Kyeonghee Jang at khj15a@acu.edu.

If you have concerns about this study or general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact ACU's Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Director of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Megan Roth, Ph.D. Dr. Roth may be reached at

(325) 674-2885

megan.roth@acu.edu

320 Hardin Administration Bldg, ACU Box 29103

Abilene, TX 79699

Consent electronic signature

Please click the button below if you agree or disagree to voluntarily participate in this study. Click only after you have read all of the information provided and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. If you wish to have a copy of this consent form, you may print it now. You do not waive any legal rights by consenting to this study.

I agree to voluntarily participate in this study

I do not agree to voluntarily participate in this study

APPENDIX C

Organizational Factors

Location

The location section captures employees' perceptions of the type of region they provide services to and the resources that are made available for that region.

1. Region
 - Urban
 - Rural
 - Other _____
2. Availability of resources
 - Abundance of resources
 - Limited resource
 - Lacking in resources
3. Did your school/ organization provide you with a clear job description before you started your position?
 - Yes
 - No

Below are a number of statements related to specific organizational factors (Internal Communication, Supervision, and Employee Engagement). Please read each one and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each statement.

Internal Communication

The internal communication section captures employees' perceptions of whether communication in the organization is reasonable, candid and helpful. This section measures the degree to which employees view communication with peers, supervisors and other parts of the organization as functional and effective.

1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree

4. The communication channels I must go through at work are reasonable.	1	2	3	4	5
5. My work atmosphere encourages open and honest communication.	1	2	3	4	5
6. The communications I receive at work are timely and informative.	1	2	3	4	5

Supervision

The supervision section captures employees' perceptions of the nature of supervisory relationships within the organization. This section measures the degree to which employees view their supervisors as fair, helpful and critical to the workflow.

1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree

7. My supervisor provides me with a clear understanding of my work responsibilities.	1	2	3	4	5
8. My supervisor recognizes outstanding work.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I am given the opportunity to do my best work.	1	2	3	4	5
10. My supervisor is consistent when administering policies concerning employees.	1	2	3	4	5
11. My supervisor evaluates my performance fairly.	1	2	3	4	5

Employee Engagement

The Employee Engagement section captures the degree to which employees are willing to go above and beyond, feel committed to the organization and are present while working. This section measures the degree to which employees feel that their ideas count, their work impacts the organization and their well-being and development is valued at the organization.

1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree

12. In my work group, my opinions and ideas count.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Our organization is known for the quality of work we provide.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I know how my work impacts others in the organization.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I have adequate resources and equipment to do my job.	1	2	3	4	5
16. The people I work with care about my personal well-being.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I trust the people in my workplace.	1	2	3	4	5
18. Training is made available to me so that I can do my job better.	1	2	3	4	5
19. Training is made available to me for personal growth and development.	1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX D

Job Ambiguity

Below are a number of statements related to job ambiguity. Please read each one and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each statement.

1 = disagree strongly, 2 = disagree, 3 = disagree slightly, 4 = neutral, 5 = agree slightly, 6 = agree, and 7 = agree strongly.

Work Method Ambiguity

20. I am certain how to go about getting my job done (the methods to use).	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
21. I know what is the best way (approach) to go about getting my work done.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
22. I know how to get my work done (what procedures to use).	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Scheduling Ambiguity

23. I know when I should be doing a particular aspect (part) of my job.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
24. I am certain about the sequencing of my work activities (when to do what).	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
25. My job is such that I know when I should be doing a given work activity.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Performance Criteria Ambiguity

Performance Criteria Ambiguity							
26. I know what my supervisor considers satisfactory work performance.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
27. It is clear to me what is considered acceptable performance by my supervisor.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
28. I know what level of performance is considered acceptable by my supervisor.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

APPENDIX E

Demographic Questions

29. Please provide your birth year (e.g. 1965, 1977, etc.).

(YYYY: _____)

30. Your gender is

- Female
- Male
- Other
- I prefer not to answer

31. Are you Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin?

- Yes
- No, not of Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin
- I prefer not to answer

32. With which of the following do you identify? (Mark all that apply)

- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Pacific Islander
- Other Race (Specify: _____)
- I prefer not to answer

33. Credentials: (Mark all that apply)

- LBSW/LBSSW
- LMSW/LMSSW
- PHD
- Other _____

34. How many years of experience do you have practicing school social work?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 7-9 years
- 10+ years

35. How many years of experience do you have practicing as a school social worker at the site you are currently serving?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 7-9 years
- 10+ years