

# Work Environment Perspectives of School Guidance Counselors in Isolated Settings

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This research compared the responses of 194 male and 153 female counselors working in isolated school settings to their non-isolated peers on work environment issues. Counselors in isolated school settings viewed themselves and their role as more highly valued than their non-isolated peers. Differences between the perceptions and coping strategies of male and female counselors were identified. Obstacles to service delivery as well as a sense of loneliness due to the absence of other guidance colleagues and associates were reported. Several positive aspects of isolation including a greater sense of control, positive affiliation and personal value were reported. The findings of this research have implications for school counselors and counselor training programs.

## INTRODUCTION

There has been increased interest in the study of mental health practice in rural areas (1; 2; 3) and on rural education (7; 8; 9) in recent years. The increased emphasis in the area of rural and small schools has resulted in the establishment of two national journals related to this topic as well as a national association. There seems little doubt that rural issues in education are worthy of more attention by educators, researchers, planners and policy makers than have been accorded it in the past and that such attention is increasing (5).

One recurring issue is the functioning of single or isolated educational specialists in schools and their personal and professional responses to such isolation. There has been little concern for this historically and there has been little systematic investigation, particularly of guidance counselors.

Guidance counselors face unique challenges because of their small number, especially in geographical areas with sparse populations and small schools. It is not uncommon to find a guidance counselor operating as the only counselor in a school or even the only counselor within a school district.

Isolation as a psycho-social phenomenon is complex in concept and diverse in explanation. The simplest definition of the word isolate is "to set apart." For human beings being set apart is in reality becoming socially isolated. Although some people tolerate isolation better than others and generalizations about its impact must be tentative, there is evidence that social isolation can create a sense of fear and anxiety (4). It is generally accepted that individuals who react with fear tend to seek comfort

by reaching out to others while those who experience anxiety will tend to withdraw socially (4). Knoblock and Goldstein (6) reported that a lack of communication with other adults on the part of isolated teachers could lead to negative self perception and a sense of losing touch with reality.

In one sense, guidance counselors are set apart by their unique training and responsibilities and in another, they are set apart as a result of the small school populations they serve. Depending on how individual counselors perceive the isolation, anxiety might bring on increased isolation whereas fear might cause the counselor to reach out to others. Being isolated could be considered a unique identity and bring enhanced status, and consequently some counselors might seek such a situation. Counselors often face physical isolation in their job, e.g., one-to-one counseling in a closed room. They also are placed in psychological isolation by virtue of their training and the way they perform their job, i.e., they may tend to behave differently toward students than other staff members. This combination of physical and psychological isolation has the potential of having a deleterious effect on the performance and well being of any school counselor as well as on the effectiveness of the guidance program.

Interest in investigating this topic emanated from previous work assessing the professional development activities of school counselors in Maine (10). In analyzing the results of that survey, it was noted that approximately forty percent of Maine school counselors were working in schools where there were no other trained school counselors. The high percentage was surprising and led to a further investigation of the issue of counselor isolation. In order to determine the effect that isolation might

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have on individual school counselors, a survey was conducted of all public school counselors in Maine. This article presents the results of that survey and the implications drawn from it.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

A questionnaire was mailed to all school guidance counselors in the State of Maine ( $n=413$ ). This included all counselors in public school systems as well as all high school vocational counselors. It did not include private school counselors. A total of 347 surveys (84%) were returned, although not all respondents completed all items. Participant characteristics reflected broad distribution across a variety of criteria. Subjects were 56% male ( $n=194$ ) and 44% female ( $n=153$ ). Their median age was 42 and they had an average of eight years of experience as guidance counselors. Of the 347 respondents, 10% were elementary counselors, 19% were middle or junior high counselors, 52% were high school counselors and 19% had responsibilities that overlapped the elementary and secondary levels.

### *Measure*

The questionnaire was created in three separate steps. First, a draft was developed. Second, semi-structured interviews with 15 counselors employed in rural or isolated settings were conducted to obtain suggestions for additional items. Last, the modified draft was administered to a convenient sample of 20 Maine school counselors. The purpose was to improve administrative instructions and item wording, as well as to eliminate redundant items.

The resulting questionnaire consisted of three major sections: (a) an initial section containing 15 questions eliciting demographic information; (b) 40 items designed to assess support, relationships, role, pressure, referral sources and professional development; and (c) a 16 item semantic differential designed to assess attitudes related to the individual's role as a guidance counselor.

### *Procedure*

Each school guidance counselor in the state was mailed a packet containing a signed cover letter that explained the purpose of the survey and discussed confidentiality, a coded copy of the survey and a stamped return envelope. Two weeks after the initial mailing, a postcard reminder was sent to all non-respondents. Four weeks after the initial mailing, a second cover letter, survey, and stamped envelope were sent. No further effort to contact non-respondents was made. The return rate was 84 percent.

### *Definition of Isolation*

The classification of isolation was determined by whether or not the respondent had another guidance

colleague working within the same school building. In other words, if there was no other counselor working within the school building where the respondent was assigned, the respondent was classified as isolated. The isolated counselors ( $n=132$ ) constituted 43% of the respondents and non-isolated counselors ( $n=176$ ) made up the remaining 57% of the sample.

### *Analysis*

The analyses were conducted in three phases. In the first phase, two factor analyses were conducted. The purpose of these analyses was data reduction. The first factor analysis considered the responses to a series of questions related to relationships and work. A varimax rotation was performed and 20 items that had loadings of .40 or greater were identified. A five factor solution was considered the most appropriate and resulted in the following categories: Administration-Guidance Relationship; Guidance Value; Pressure; Referral; and Personal Support. A second factor analysis using varimax rotation was performed on the 16 item semantic differential. Fifteen of the 16 items had loadings of .40 or greater. A three factor solution was identified as most appropriate and resulted in the following categories: Professional Identity; Stress; and Role.

In the second phase of the analysis, responses from a series of questions on the frequency of requested support were combined to create a single variable entitled Requested Support. In a similar manner, responses to a series of questions related to professional development combined, resulting in a single variable called Professional Development.

Finally, a 2 x 2 (Isolation x Sex) analysis of variance of each of the ten identified factor scores was conducted. Sex was included as an independent variable as preliminary analyses indicated such an effect.

## RESULTS

Isolation was defined in this study as a function of counselors being alone, that is, without having another counselor colleague within the building or buildings where they worked. Results of the analysis of variance for each of the major factors are presented in Table 1. Where significant effects were found, means for each isolation and sex group are presented in Table 2.

The perception of guidance counselors was that their administrators viewed guidance, in general, in a very positive way and that perception was consistent whether they were in isolated or non-isolated settings. Counselors in isolated settings saw themselves and their role as being more highly valued than counselors who were in non-isolated environments. Although the vast majority of respondents reported that they were under moderate to high pressure, a significant interaction effect was identified. Female counselors in isolated settings reported being under the least amount of pressure whereas female counselors in non-isolated settings reported being under the most pressure. Male counselors reported being under

moderate pressure in both isolated and non-isolated settings. In general, the non-isolated counselors perceived their referral services to be significantly more adequate and accessible than did counselors in isolated settings. Female counselors, regardless of their setting, were significantly less positive about the availability and adequacy of these resources than were male counselors. Personal support from friends and family was reported as being significantly more important by females than males and there were no significant differences in personal support by isolated or non-isolated setting. Female counselors viewed their professional identity in a significantly more positive way than did male counselors, seeing themselves as more reputable, valuable, effective, progressive and successful. There were no differences in this factor between counselors in isolated or non-isolated setting. No significant differences were found on the factors of stress, role, requested support or professional development.

**TABLE 1**  
Results of Sex by Isolation Analysis of Variance of Factor Scores

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	F
<b>Administration-Guidance Relationship</b>			
Main Effects	1.79	2	0.90
Sex	0.27	1	0.27
Isolation	1.56	1	1.56
Interaction	1.94	1	1.95
Residual	303.25	304	
<b>Guidance Value</b>			
Main Effects	5.43	2	2.74
Sex	0.13	1	0.13
Isolation	5.35	1	5.39*
Interaction	0.12	1	0.12
Residual	301.43	304	
<b>Pressure</b>			
Main Effects	3.67	2	1.87
Sex	0.12	1	0.12
Isolation	3.59	1	3.66
Interaction	5.32	1	5.42*
Residual	298.00	304	
<b>Referral</b>			
Main Effects	15.18	2	7.93***
Sex	3.59	1	3.75*
Isolation	12.00	1	12.53***
Interaction	0.81	1	0.85
Residual	290.99	304	
<b>Personal Support</b>			
Main Effects	5.23	2	2.64
Sex	5.15	1	5.21*

**TABLE 1 Continued**  
Results of Sex by Isolation Analysis of Variance of Factor Scores

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	F
Isolation	0.04	1	0.04
Interaction	0.98	1	0.99
Residual	300.78	304	
<b>Professional Identity</b>			
Main Effects	9.71	2	4.96**
Sex	9.69	1	9.92**
Isolation	0.02	1	0.02
Interaction	0.03	1	0.04
Residual	287.25	294	
<b>Stress</b>			
Main Effects	2.62	2	1.31
Sex	1.41	1	1.41
Isolation	1.17	1	1.17
Interaction	0.02	1	0.02
Residual	294.31	294	
<b>Role</b>			
Main Effects	0.46	1	0.23
Sex	0.01	1	0.01
Isolation	0.45	1	0.44
Interaction	0.34	1	0.34
Residual	296.19	294	
<b>Requested Support</b>			
Main Effects	47.86	2	0.74
Sex	1.31	1	0.04
Isolation	46.79	1	1.46
Interaction	3.25	1	
Residual	10956.00	342	
<b>Professional Development</b>			
Main Effects	24.06	2	1.72
Sex	10.91	1	1.56
Isolation	13.53	1	1.94
Interaction	4.29	1	0.61
Residual	2354.89	338	

\*p<.05      \*\* p<.01      \*\*\*p<.001

**DISCUSSION**

The results of this study suggest that isolated counselors have two important sources of support; one is the positive way in which their administrators perceive them and second, the high regard professional staff and community members have of them. It may well be that isolated counselors have more interaction with these persons than do non-isolated counselors. Understanding the impact of frequency of interaction may be a key to helping counselors develop more effective bases of support.

TABLE 2  
Means for Groups with Significant  
Differences on Factor Scores

Sex	Factor	Isolated	Non Isolated
	Guidance Value		
Male		-0.15(77)	0.15(97)
Female		-0.15(55)	0.07(79)
	Pressure		
Male		0.02	0.01
Female		-0.33	0.20
	Referral		
Male		0.18	-0.31
Female		0.28	0.00
	Personal Support		
Male		0.18	0.06
Females		-0.21	-0.10
	Professional Identity		
Male		0.14(69)	0.18(96)
Female		-0.20(54)	-0.20(79)

*Note:* All means are expressed as standard scores. Cell n's are expressed within parentheses and where not expressed they are the same as the factor above.

The pressure to perform a role with many facets was an issue for all counselors. However, isolated females reported the least amount of pressure and non-isolated females reported feeling the most pressure. Do females more often than males, when working with other counselors, experience competition? Do they feel compelled to take on (or accept) more tasks to "prove themselves worthy"? Do women measure themselves by a man's yardstick? Non-isolated settings may create a competitiveness which could result in working under more pressure. On the other hand, when female counselors work alone it is conceivable that there is no "man's yardstick"; thus, they are more able to perform the tasks without that undue sense of pressure and competitiveness. Also, women are more concerned about relationship factors. The addition of other counselors adds more people with whom to relate and perhaps complicates their role and they then may feel additional responsibility as "peace keepers" among their colleagues.

In terms of availability and adequacy of referral services, the results were as expected. Isolated counselors reported having problems finding adequate resources. More specifically, females viewed available referral services less positively than their male peers. It is possible that females are more comfortable asking for help and, consequently, are more apt to use such resources. Males in comparison may tend to believe that they have to solve problems without outside help. Thus, by nature of

more often wanting and seeking help when in need, females may be more critical than males when perceived sources of assistance do not meet the expectations they have for it.

Reflection on the topic of referral services suggests that students and counselors would benefit from better planning and organization of support services for counselors who are isolated. Given the large number of schools that employ just one counselor, it is clear that services required for the provision of quality education to many students are not available. Also, given that the provision of services is warranted for all children, the problem presented to a local school district is how to provide or obtain needed services in a reasonable and cost-effective way. Collaboration between school districts and/or regional service programs can be a mechanism to obtain these needed services. Although a regional service delivery model may not be as ideal as having locally available services, reasonable alternatives appear to be limited.

The isolation and gender differences in counselor perceptions raise other important issues. It appears that males may believe that support in the counselor role is not needed or that asking for support from others is not an appropriate behavior for them. This desire for independence on the part of males may in fact be a negative influence on their own identities as guidance counselors. It appears that females behave somewhat differently in that they are more apt to seek the support of others, and have a more positive view of their profession and their place in that profession. As guidance moves from a predominantly male to a predominantly female profession, these results raise serious questions around the issue of gender. It appears that guidance has become a more attractive profession for females and a less attractive one for males. With similar results in previous studies, Sutton and Southworth (11) have argued that females view guidance as an opportunity for upward mobility while males more often look for upward mobility outside the profession. Similarly, over the last decade, males have moved away from the other helping professions toward other occupations which are perceived as more attractive either by virtue of better pay or greater prestige. This is an issue that requires the careful attention of both the American School Counselor Association and guidance practitioners.

## CONCLUSION

The idea that some counselors may tolerate isolated settings better than others appears to have some merit. There appears to be a clear indication from this study that female counselors feel more comfortable than males in isolated environments, and for good reasons. Their movement toward others in seeking support seems to lessen the pressure they feel and facilitates the attainment of personal and professional goals.

The need for more affiliation, whether it is with non-professionals or professionals, seems to have the potential for some positive influences for working in an isolated setting. When local service options are limited, it is no

secret that collaboration and regionalization are effective ways of increasing both the quality and quantity of services. In order to provide the best services for children, it would seem logical for guidance counselors to increase their affiliation with professionals outside their school system, thereby giving them greater opportunity to reduce their personal isolation. Similarly, having no other colleagues readily available to associate with forces counselors into closer relationships with other staff members, and increases their opportunities for promoting themselves and their guidance programs.

Although being an isolated counselor presents some serious obstacles to service delivery as well as a formidable professional challenge, it has some concomitant positive aspects that contribute to real opportunities for success. Being alone can provide the counselor with a greater sense of control in developing and directing the guidance program; there is the positive identity associated with being one of a kind; the phenomena of isolation can lead to greater affiliation which can benefit the guidance program as well as the counselor; and as an isolated counselor, there is a greater likelihood of being more highly valued by other professional staff and community members.

The evidence from this study is quite clear, there are occupational differences between counselors who are isolated and those who are not. It seems all too easy to see these differences as obstacles to struggle against. Such a mind set can cause guidance counselors an undue amount of stress and only result in discouragement. It may be more helpful to view these differences not so much as impediments but as differences requiring different responses, of accommodation rather than conflict. Being isolated presents counselors with both an opportunity and a challenge to combine their strengths with the advantages of working by oneself to make guidance a program that positively effects students, staff and community alike.

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