

THE ROLE OF WORK ENVIRONMENT AND CHARACTER STRENGTHS ON
MEANINGFUL WORK IN COUNSELORS: A STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODEL
OF COUNSELOR BURNOUT

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DEDICATION

To my grandma, Amin June, while you may not have had the opportunity for higher education, you are one of the wisest women I know. Thank you for showing me how being present and kind can have a ripple effect on our world. My research highlights what you have always taught me: believe in the good of others and hold space for hope against all odds.

To my mom and dad, who instilled the pursuit of knowledge within me from a young age. Thank you for everything you have done to give me the opportunity for higher education. Your example of perseverance inspired me in my academic pursuits.

ABSTRACT

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The phenomenon of burnout has been problematic for professionals engaging in *people work* since the beginning of helping professions. Decades after researchers began investigating the phenomenon of burnout, counselors continue to experience high levels of burnout that substantially impact their personal and professional well-being. With the rise of existential positive psychology, promising applications of existential theories on strengths-based interventions and their application within different work environments may yield promising results in addressing burnout in counselors.

This study expanded upon the work of Allan et al. (2019) by introducing work environment as an additional variable when investigating the relationship between salient counselor character strengths on burnout as mediated by meaningful work. The following study also used the Maslach Burnout Inventory – Human Services Survey to examine the relationship of these variables on each dimension of burnout. An online survey of 399 counselors in the United States provided the data for a structural equation model. A post-hoc modification to the mediation model strengthened model fit. Completion of the study yielded additional information on results, discussion, and future recommendations.

KEY WORDS: Burnout; Character strengths; Meaningful work; Work environment; Structural equation model

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

How can you fill another person's bucket if you have nothing left in your bucket to give? The metaphor of *bucket filling*, which visually describes the ability to help another restore their mental and emotional wellbeing, originated from Rath and Clifton (2004). Known for their contributions to the field of positive psychology, Rath and Clifton acknowledged the duality of helping others. The constant strain of providing empathy during an emotionally vulnerable period of time can leave counselors with a limited supply of emotional resources, described as *bucket dipping*. Throughout the years, this phenomenon has earned various titles and is now most commonly identified as *burnout* (Maslach, 1976). Burnout can occur to anyone in a variety of personal and professional contexts. Yet, despite decades of research on the subject, limited research exists for those most vulnerable to the phenomenon, the counseling profession.

The development of burnout may be mitigated and prevented through the framework of existential positive psychology. Even the most seasoned counseling professionals are susceptible to the experience of burnout, which may lead them to question the effectiveness, purpose, or meaning of their professional identity. These existential concerns are not new to the human experience, but an existential perspective on the experience of burnout could lend itself to a new way of addressing the problem. Nietzsche (1901/1910) noted that all who understand their *why* can endure any *how*. Victor Frankl, the father of Logotherapy later supported this philosophy by detailing the significance of meaning-making and purpose as a means of enduring suffering (Frankl, 1946/1984). Despite the congruence of these philosophical and psychological theories in

addressing the phenomenon of burnout, few researchers have examined meaning-making as a lens for enduring the inevitable struggle faced by the counselors who offer the contents of their *bucket* for the growth of their clients.

Background of the Study

Through this study I examined the relationship between meaningful work, work environment, and character strengths on dimensions of burnout in a sample of counselors. I also identified an additional sample of counselors and their unique character strengths compared to the normed population. This research furthered the work of Allan et al. (2019) who examined similar variables and identified a need for future research to extend the sample of counselor's character strengths and explore the relationship of meaningful work and burnout as mediated by work environment. Researchers have acknowledged the importance of examining the relationship of both individual factors (e.g. character strengths, meaningful work) and environmental factors (e.g. work environment) on burnout (Lee et al., 2011; Simionato & Simpson, 2018).

Burnout in the Counseling Field

Although burnout has likely been experienced since the origins of the human services industry, the concept was researched and published in greater detail following the rise of free clinics, which provided care to low-income and marginalized members of the community (Hoffarth, 2017). Psychologist Herbert Freudenberger, after working 16-hour days for a year in his private practice and volunteering at The St. Marks Clinic, recognized feelings of physical exhaustion and emotional depletion that impacted his personal and professional functioning (Freudenberger, 1971; Hoffarth, 2017). Through these experiences, Freudenberger began to notice similar patterns in his staff and

theorized that human service workers' commitment to social change led them to help those who are, “. . .often in extreme need, and because of this they continually take, suck, demand. . .requir[ing] continuous giving on our part” (Freudenberger, 1975, p. 75). The innate characteristics of human service work were thought to contribute to the development of burnout, which was defined as a type of work-related stress brought on by chronic emotional arousal leading to symptoms of exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach, 1976). In order to develop a tangible comprehension of the burnout experience, researchers characterized these reportable symptoms (i.e. exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy) as operationalized dimensions of burnout (Maslach et al., 1997).

Since Freudenberger and Maslach began their research into the phenomenon of burnout, the concept became a popularized term in the field of occupational stress (Maslach, 1982). Although other occupations sought to examine the general effects of burnout within their field, the origination of burnout stemmed from the effects of the human service workers which continues to be the profession at greatest risk (Cimiotti et al., 2012; Freudenberger, 1971; Hoffarth, 2017).

Despite decades of research on the phenomenon, the counseling profession continues to experience the effects of burnout (Gaal, 2010; Lent & Schwartz, 2012; Simionato & Simpson, 2018). For example, Gaal (2010) identified community mental health counselors who experienced higher levels of burnout than counselors working in private practice. These findings, almost half a century later, support Freudenberger's initial hypothesis that the depletion of emotional resources accelerates based on the

population served and the characteristics of the work environment (Freudenberger, 1971; Gaal, 2010).

While Freudenberger (1971) and Maslach (1976) both identified situational and environmental factors as significant contributors to the development of burnout, this commentary appears merely as a footnote in most of the original burnout literature (Hoffarth, 2017). In an effort to combat the effects of burnout, psychologists focused on an individual's perception and response as opposed to what was characterized as unchangeable aspects of the environment (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980; Maslach, 1982). The decision to focus solely on individual factors as opposed to all facets of the phenomenon debilitated the advancement of burnout research and treatment. Furthermore, this method of examining burnout suggested that the individual was the problem, which contributes to the stigma that health service workers were to blame for caring too much. Maslach suggested that the field had “. . . unrealistic ideas about the extent of personal growth and caring [clients] can legitimately expect” (Maslach, 1976, p. 122). This line of thought, without the inclusion of environmental factors and organizational responsibility, inaccurately led an emotionally depleted worker to believe that the only solution was to care less.

At this juncture, researchers have identified prevalence, development, risk factors, and protective factors as common phenomena shared by counselors at risk for burnout (Lee et al., 2011; Simionato & Simpson, 2018). However, few studies have empirically examined treatment methods and even less progress has been made by organizational leaders feeling pressured to place greater focus on environmental change to address situational factors influencing burnout (Aarons et al., 2009).

Character Strengths

Seligman (2002) advanced the field of positive psychology by addressing the human condition through wellbeing and the components of humanism as an alternative to the disease model of psychology, which focuses on the illness in order to *fix* them. This reframe led to the development of strengths-based interventions that allow an individual to tap into their own positive qualities to promote well-being (Goodman et al., 2018). Peterson and Seligman (2004) coined the concept of *character strengths*, which are the traits that all individuals have within them to varying degrees. Specific strengths have greater significance when they align with their moral virtues. The Values in Action Strengths Inventory (VIA-IS) is an instrument developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004) to identify an individual's unique composition of 28-character traits, which then describes an individual's six core virtues. Many subsequent studies have operationalized humanistic traits by using this instrument to explore its positive impact on human behavior in the workplace (Miglianico et al., 2019).

According to Park et al. (2006) universal character strengths identified across geographic and cultural regions suggest necessary characteristics for a functioning society, with the most prominent character strengths found in the United States including: kindness, fairness, honesty, gratitude, and judgment. While the influence of character strengths has been explored in various facets of work-related outcomes (Heintz & Ruch, 2019), researchers have only recently begun exploring the unique character strengths of counselors, finding that counselors reported greater love of learning, perspective, social intelligence, love, and spirituality than the population norm (Allan et al., 2019). According to Bretherton and Niemiec (2018) specific identification of character strengths

and moral virtues humanizes the individual and allows for the expression of existential concerns.

Meaningful Work

The integration of existential characteristics, such as meaning-making and purpose, within the empirically supported realm of positive psychology supports greater exploration of humanistic traits in a measurable way. Meaningful work refers to the existential premise that all beings seek to contribute some type of significance that is meaningful in the context of their life (Frankl, 1946/1984; Steger et al., 2012). Work is a large percentage of an individual's day-to-day routine; therefore, greater life satisfaction is reported when work is perceived to be meaningful (Steger et al., 2012; Steger & Shin, 2010). The Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI) developed by Steger et al. (2012), measured the concept of meaningful work through three components: the degree one finds significance and purpose in their work, the contributions one's work makes to their personal meaning in life, and the positive contribution one's work makes towards the greater good of society. These components take into consideration both the individual and environmental factors that make-up the experience of work. Steger et al. (2012) acknowledged that meaningful work can come from within the individual, but it can also come from the organization. In fact, researchers identified that meaningful work had a positive relationship with organizational commitment, career commitment, intrinsic and extrinsic work motivations, organizational citizenship, meaning in life, and life satisfaction (Steger et al., 2012). Furthermore, the use of specific character strengths within the context of work plays a significant role in meaningful work and well-being (Steger et al., 2013). The multidimensional model of meaningful work and its

relationship with well-being further support the idea that an individual's underlying desire for meaning can be cultivated by organizations who honor existential concerns and highlight universal character strengths to promote a greater mission.

Statement of the Problem

Existentialists have long since acknowledged that while there is little power to change one's environment, there is power in how one responds (Frankl, 1946/1984). Burnout is known to develop within individuals experiencing situational stressors created by specific work environments (Young, 2015). While helping professionals are at an increased risk for experiencing burnout (Cimiotti et al., 2012; Morse et al., 2012; West, 2015). Counselors are unique helping professionals who use their own emotional resources to hold space so that clients can process their experiences, putting them at high risk for burnout (Gaal, 2010; O'Connor et al., 2018). While researchers have focused on individual factors (e.g. the way an individual responds to stress), few researchers have holistically examined the relationship between environmental factors on counselors' response to burnout (Dreison et al., 2018).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to further the model introduced by Allan et al. (2019) by adding an additional sample of counselors reporting their salient character strengths and examining the predictive nature of work environment on burnout as mediated by meaningful work. Allan et al. (2019) compiled data regarding counselor character strengths and examined the relationship between character strengths and a composite measure of burnout. Allan et al. (2019) also examined the relationship of meaningful work on a global index of burnout. My study added an additional sample of counselor

character strengths to review and explore the relationship of these strengths on each dimension of burnout, rather than assuming that a composite burnout score would reflect this multi-faceted phenomenon. With the exploration of multiple burnout dimensions, my study also examined the relationship of each dimension of burnout on meaningful work, which provided a more concrete understanding of how different dimensions of burnout were influenced. Furthermore, my study added to the current body of literature by exploring the relationship of work environment on burnout, as recommended by Allan et al. (2019).

Significance of the Study

By identifying the predictive contributions of counselor strengths, work environment, and meaningful work on dimensions of burnout, counselors can advance interventions to address burnout in the counseling profession. The utilization of individualized character strengths for the treatment and prevention of burnout symptoms in counselors help support their overall work-life satisfaction, improve quality of client care, and reduce physical and psychological side effects of burnout symptoms. Furthermore, by examining the relationship of work environment, this study provides evidence for organizational leaders to examine whether their policies are congruent with the values of their mission and staff.

Definition of Terms

Burnout

A type of work-related chronic stress identified by symptoms of emotional depletion, cynicism, and/or loss of personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1997). For the purposes of this research study, the term burnout refers to a non-diagnostic

phenomenon operationalized through the symptoms identified above. Following the recommendations of Maslach et al. (1997), burnout will not be reported as a single construct but rather a phenomenon depicted through the following subscales.

Emotional Exhaustion

This is a dimension of burnout characterized as the depletion of emotional, physical, and mental resources (Maslach et al., 1997). For the purposes of this study, the Emotional Exhaustion subscale questions within the Maslach Burnout Inventory – Human Service Survey (MBI-HSS) measures this symptom (Maslach et al., 1997).

Depersonalization

This is a dimension of burnout characterized by a sense of disconnection, detachment, or dehumanization of another (Maslach et al., 1997). For the purposes of this study, the Depersonalization subscale questions within the MBI-HSS measures this symptom (Maslach et al., 1997).

Personal Accomplishment

This is a dimension of burnout characterized by feelings of failure or inadequacy regarding goals or sense of self (Maslach et al., 1997). For the purposes of this study, the Personal Accomplishment subscale questions within the MBI-HSS are used to measure this symptom inversely (Maslach et al., 1997).

Character Strength

Character strengths refer to positive traits that compose morally valued virtues within an individual (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For the purposes of this study, the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) measures character strengths (Peterson

& Seligman, 2004). Through use of the VIA-IS, there are 24 possible character strengths grouped into six core virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Counselor

For the purposes of this study, counselor refers to a mental health professional or student who is currently in the process of completing, or has completed, graduate studies with clinical practice in the field of counseling, psychology, social work, and/or marriage and family therapy. This individual self-reports as a counselor or therapist currently practicing within the United States and can be receiving supervision or practicing independently.

Meaningful Work

A global construct measured through the perceived impact of the work within an individual, those they serve, and the greater good of that work in the long-term. For the purposes of this study, the Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI) measures meaningful work (Steger et al., 2012). The subscales that make up this composite score include positive meaning, meaning-making through work, and greater good motivations (Steger et al., 2012).

Work Environment

The following study categorizes work environment as the descriptors that compose the organization in which the target population (i.e. counselors) provides direct care. The categorization of work environments for this study are separated into the location in which the clinical work occurs (e.g. field, clinic, or inpatient), and the organizational funding type (e.g. individual private practice, group private practice, non-profit/charitable organization, local mental health authority/governmental

organization/community health, university counseling setting, privately funded hospital/clinic, residential treatment facility/group home, and jail/prison/detention center). This differentiation was developed following a review of the literature regarding burnout and work environment (Gaal, 2010; Lent & Schwartz, 2012; Sweeney et al., 2002).

Theoretical Framework

Existentialists identified four key elements, known as *ultimate concerns*, which can be traced back to all issues of human existence (May, 1950; Yalom, 1980). While an individual may experience environmental stressors throughout their lives, it is the awareness of *why* those stressors exist and *how* they contribute to a greater purpose that allows humans to persevere (Frankl, 1946/1984). As psychologists continued to study the *why* of existential anxieties, positive psychologists built upon these principles to explore how universal human experiences can be employed more effectively to promote well-being and life satisfaction (Peterson, 2006). Peterson and Seligman (2004) identified 24 universal character strengths that can be called upon during times of adversity in order to maintain authenticity with one's personal values. Existentialism encourages exploration and curiosity into the complexities of human existence, while positive psychology provides the tools for individuals to thrive in their search for a meaningful life (Wong, 2009).

With the theoretical framework of existential positive psychology in mind, the development of burnout can be described as a symptom of inauthenticity and loss of meaning in the attempted good works of counselors. Although the environmental factors that contribute to burnout may not be easily changed, existential positive psychology

encourages the identification of those factors in order to acknowledge the purpose that they serve (Wong, 2009). Through the use of individual strengths, counselors will be able to recall how they contribute to the greater good of society. These reminders support the journey back to an authentic self. Existential positive psychology will guide this study by acknowledging the unavoidable stressors of the counseling profession that contribute to burnout. These stressors are often a compilation of demands from a counselor's work environment and must be withstood through one's search for meaning in their good works. Individual character strengths support this search for meaning during those times of adversity.

Research Questions

For the purposes of this study, I looked at three research questions similar to Allan et al. (2019). The research question and subsequent hypothesis are organized in the following section. The first research question asked: *What are the most salient character strengths in counselors compared to population means?* I hypothesize that the character strengths more salient in counselors than the normed group will be congruent with the findings of the original study, which included, love of learning, perspective, social intelligence, love, and spirituality (Allan et al., 2019).

The second research question asked: *Which character strengths and work environments were most related to meaningful work and burnout among the counselor sample?* While the original study hypothesized that the *happiness strengths* (i.e. hope, love, gratitude, curiosity, and zest) would have a relationship with meaningful work and burnout, the researchers were only partially correct (Allan et al., 2019). Because there are 24 possible character strengths that could influence meaningful work and burnout in

different ways, I hypothesize the influence of character strengths based on their grouping with the six core virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For this study, I hypothesize that character strengths composing of the *humanity virtue* (i.e. love, kindness, and social intelligence) and *transcendence virtue* (i.e. appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality) will predict meaningful work, while the *temperance virtue* (i.e. forgiveness, humility, prudence & self-regulation) and the *courage virtue* (i.e., bravery, perseverance, honesty, and zest) will predict burnout. Furthermore, in congruence with the findings of Gaal (2010), I hypothesize that community mental health and field-based work environments will more significantly predict burnout than clinic, or private-practice-based work environments.

The final research question will ask: *What is the relationship of counselors' character strengths and work environment to dimensions of burnout with meaningful work as a potential mediator?* Based on previous findings (Allan et al., 2019; Gaal, 2010; He et al., 2017), I hypothesize that the character strengths and work environments identified in the second research hypothesis will be significantly associated with meaningful work, which will negatively relate to the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization subscale of burnout and positively relate to the personal accomplishment subscale.

Limitations

The following study has a few limitations that require notation. Firstly, VIA-IS (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) is an instrument that identifies strengths an individual endorses at the time of the assessment rather than strengths employed specifically in a work context. This information could limit whether character strengths identified are

actively used in the specific work environment where burnout is reported. Furthermore, the data was collected across a single period of time from July 2020 to October 2020, which limits the predictive nature of causal inferences to that specific point in time. This period of data collection occurred during an unprecedented global pandemic of the novel coronavirus-19. This global pandemic unavoidably impacted variables examined in this study as evidenced by additional demands of mental health professionals which altered the characteristics of the work environments examined (Joshi & Sharma, 2020). Nevertheless, the rise in burnout across occupations throughout this global pandemic serves as a somber affirmation that our understanding of burnout is severely lacking and further advancements are needed.

Delimitations

In an effort to collect data related to a specific population, delimitations exclude individuals who did not meet inclusion criteria. Individuals excluded from the study include those who have not yet begun clinical practice. Additionally, individuals were excluded from data collection if they were not practicing in the United States or if they could not answer the survey in English.

Assumptions

In the process of completing this study, several assumptions were accepted in order to proceed. First, participants who completed the survey were working in the field of counseling, as self-reported in the demographic questionnaire. Additionally, participants understood the purpose of the research, the wording of the instruments, and were capable of answering the questions truthfully. Furthermore, instruments used were

psychometrically sound, the methodology used was congruent with the research questions, and both were used appropriately for the purposes of the study.

Organization of the Study

The following dissertation will be detailed throughout five chapters. The present section concludes Chapter I in which the introduction and background of the study were explained. Furthermore, the conclusion of the first chapter provides a clear statement of the problem, purpose of the study, significance of the study, definition of terms, theoretical framework, research questions and hypotheses, limitations, delimitations, and assumptions. From there, Chapter II will provide a detailed review of the literature as it relates to the phenomenon of burnout, the theoretical foundation of meaningful work, and the measurement of character strengths. Chapter III details the methodology which includes the design of the research, participants, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter IV explores the demographic information of participants in the study and the results of each research question proposed in Chapter I. To conclude the dissertation, Chapter V will provide a discussion of the results, their implications to the population researched, and future recommendations of additional research.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Researchers have examined the phenomenon of work-related stress comprehensively for more than four decades across helping professions (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach, 1976; Simionato & Simpson, 2018). Studies on work-related stress have explored the causes, presentation of symptoms, and negative impacts on work performance (Burman & Goswami, 2018). Limited research empirically investigated the phenomenon of burnout in mental health professionals or through an existential lens. First, this literature review will offer a brief overview of existential theory, its influence on positive psychology, and how this theoretical foundation applies to the present research. Recent studies have built on elements of existential philosophy to develop positive psychology applications for the promotion of work satisfaction (Allan et al., 2019). Following the theoretical framework, this chapter will purposefully review the constructs of burnout and meaningful work as they apply to the following study. In addition to differentiating burnout terminology and supplying a description of burnout symptoms, this chapter will discuss the different types of measures for burnout that are prominent in the literature. Furthermore, the prevalence, impact, and risk factors for burnout in helping professionals will be detailed. The literature review will also identify protective factors, and potential protective factors through character strengths. The integration of positive psychology's use of character strengths through an existential perspective can be used to empirically explore and advance a model of counselor burnout that could supply practical implications for future interventions (Allan et al., 2019).

The Theoretical Foundation of Meaningful Work

The framework of existential philosophy relies on the tenant that truth is subjective, and one cannot detach themselves from their personal analysis of meaning (Nietzsche, 1901/1910). With this theoretical perspective, it is believed that an individual creates their own subjective meaning inherently through their unique perceptions of the world around them. If personal meaning ascribed to life no longer aligns with an individual's subjective perception of their world, the quest for meaning must resume. As an individual grows, the reevaluation of meaning is necessary in order to ensure it aligns with one's purpose. In moments where the idea of traveling that lonely path again to find meaning seems daunting, it can feel natural to avoid the search. Yalom (1980) emphasizes that the exploration for personal meaning cannot be left unattended for risk of meaninglessness. Meaninglessness is what ultimately leads to human distress (Frankl, 1946/1984; May, 1950; Yalom, 1980).

Frankl (1946/1984) proposed that a search for meaning is an imperative part to a fulfilling life that can withstand suffering. Through Frankl's (1946/1984) psychology of meaning, he introduced the term *existential vacuum*, which described a mode of existence without any meaning or purpose. This state of being is prone to neuroticism. To relieve the pressure, Frankl described the concept of *existential fulfilment*, which provided human beings a way of life full of meaning and purpose. These terms describe the theoretical conceptualization of burnout in life, and suggest relief is found through the search for meaning.

Integration of Positive Psychology

Abraham Maslow first coined the term positive psychology in his book titled *Motivation and Personality* (1954) due to his interest in shifting the field's perspective of exploring the human condition in terms of potential rather than dysfunction. From this perspective shift, Martin Seligman pioneered the study of positive psychology to empirically examine the variables that promote a meaningful and fulfilling life (Seligman, 2002). The principles of positive psychology build upon the philosophical underpinnings of humanism and existential psychotherapy through the notion that human beings are inherently motivated to find meaning and fulfill their potential (Yalom, 1980). An exploration of the various perspectives of existential and positive psychology similarly concluded that meaning is the foundation for human existence; however, positive psychologists also seek to promote empirical evidence of constructs supporting the act of meaning-making in pursuit of a happy life (Jurica et al., 2014; Wong, 2012). In fact, Wong (2014) developed a quantifiable meaning-seeking model from the framework of Victor Frankl's concept of *will to meaning* (Frankl, 1969).

The recent advancements of existential positive psychology describe a *second wave* of positive psychology that focuses on the coexistence of light and dark sides of human existence through an individual's search for purpose (Ivtzan et al., 2015; Wong, 2009, 2014). The integration of positive psychology with the foundational principles of existential theory best explains the influence of character strengths on meaning-making, particularly in the workplace. The emergence of existential positive psychology, as well as recent studies exploring the benefits of identifying and utilizing character strengths for

workplace satisfaction, further support the justification for this integration (Allan et al., 2019; Littman-Ovadia et al., 2017; Wong, 2009).

Defining Burnout

Helping professionals experiencing adverse psychological effects as a result of working with chronic distress is a longstanding area of concern examined through a multitude of identifiers (Newell & Macneil, 2010). Unfortunately, with the variety of terms developed to describe similar and overlapping concepts, researchers have struggled to adequately evaluate the development of the phenomenon. Compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, and burnout are common terms used to describe the negative impact of emotionally intensive work. Compassion fatigue refers to a type of mental exhaustion brought on specifically by the awareness and desire to relieve physical and emotional pain of another (Figley, 1995; Figley & Roop, 2006; Figley & Stamm, 1996). Figley (1995) called for a change of terminology from secondary traumatic stress to compassion fatigue in order to reduce the stigma associated with a clinical diagnosis. Compassion fatigue was originally defined as secondary traumatic stress; however, this is also a clinically diagnosable specifier of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in which the individual is exposed to details of a trauma and presents with symptoms, such as hyperarousal, avoidance, intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, and dissociation (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While this is a legitimate issue in the field of trauma counseling, it is specifically associated with personal or vicarious trauma and does not encompass various individual and organizational stressors of *people work* (Maslach, 1976; Munroe, 1995; Newell & Macneil, 2010).

Burnout is more closely aligned with a subclinical population of individuals experiencing physical, emotional, and psychological exhaustion as a result of chronic exposure to stressful situations (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach et al., 2001). Maslach and colleagues (2001) called this phenomenon *burning out*, which involves a progressive development of symptoms over a period of exposure. This phenomenon can occur in various occupations, but originated as a chronic side effect of job demands in helping professions (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach et al., 2001). The terminology of *burnout* more specifically acknowledges the individual and organizational stressors that influence this phenomenon experienced by helping professionals (Newell & Macneil, 2010).

Multidimensional Model of Burnout

The most common approach to defining burnout is through the multidimensional model, which breaks down this complex concept into three subcategories: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1997).

Emotional exhaustion is a frame of mind that develops in an individual whose emotional resources are drained due to the chronic needs of their client or organization.

Depersonalization refers to cynicism due to the negativity and disinterest of an individual in response to their environment. This form of depersonalization described above differs from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders' (5th edition; DSM-V) definition of Depersonalization Disorder, which more specifically refers to a clinically significant distorted perception of self (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Personal accomplishment refers to the level of an individual's general feeling of adequacy in relation to internal or external factors. Some researchers have speculated that the most important symptom of burnout is emotional exhaustion (Shirom, 1989). Leiter

and Maslach (1988) originally proposed that this multidimensional model of burnout followed a specific linear pattern of development. In this model, emotional exhaustion led to an individual's attempt to cope through detachment and depersonalization, which ultimately resulted in a loss of personal accomplishment.

Lee and Ashforth (1990) proposed the first non-linear model of burnout development after conducting an eight-month longitudinal study. Lee and Ashforth (1990) compiled self-report measures of burnout from 219 supervisors in a public welfare agency of a major midwestern city within the United States. Once obtaining data from the Maslach Burnout Inventory- Human Services Survey, researchers compiled a confirmatory factor analysis, canonical correlation, and composed a three-factor structural equation model. Lee and Ashforth (1990) proposed from their findings that emotional exhaustion leads to both depersonalization and loss of personal accomplishment simultaneously. Future research is needed to explore the differing factors influencing the progression of burnout development across health and human service workers (Lee & Ashforth, 1990).

Measurement of Burnout

Empirical investigations of burnout have led to multiple instruments for measuring burnout (Qiao & Schaufeli, 2011). Some instruments have focused on exhaustion as a singular dimension of burnout (Shirom-Melamed Burnout Measure; Shirom & Melamed, 2006). Another instrument provides a single burnout score that encompasses all three dimensions (Burnout Measure; Maslach-Pines, 2005). Developers of instruments following the multidimensional model of burnout acknowledged the complexities of the construct by measuring either two dimensions (Oldenburg Burnout

Inventory; Demerouti et al., 2003) or three dimensions (Maslach Burnout Inventory; Maslach et al., 1997). The following section will briefly review the main measures of burnout throughout the literature.

Maslach Burnout Inventory – Human Services Survey

It is widely recognized that the Maslach Burnout Inventory – Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS; Maslach et al., 1997) is considered the gold standard for measuring burnout for a variety of reasons (Lee et al., 2011; Simionato & Simpson, 2018). This instrument follows the multidimensional model of burnout by inquiring about the three facets of burnout (i.e. emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment). Furthermore, this instrument has subscale scores for each facet and does not encourage the use of a global scale due to the theoretical understanding of burnout as a syndrome developed through a compilation of stressors and symptoms (Maslach, 1976). MBI-HSS originated as an instrument measuring burnout in individuals working with people, hence the identifier of Human Service Survey. Later the MBI was repurposed to include a General Survey for other occupations (Schaufeli et al., 1996). One noted area of concern regarding the MBI-HSS is the use of personal accomplishment as a third construct of burnout. Qiao and Schaufeli (2011) conducted an analysis of convergent validity and found that personal accomplishment may parallel emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, but appears to be a different dimension that more closely aligns with engagement. While some may suggest engagement is the opposite of burnout, it is rather an independent but negatively correlated construct (Qiao & Schaufeli, 2011). As the most widely used instrument for measuring burnout in the literature, this

study will expand upon previous research to identify potential mediating effects on the multidimensional construct of burnout (Lee et al., 2011; Simionato & Simpson, 2018).

Oldenburg Burnout Inventory

A two-dimensional instrument, The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI), measures exhaustion and disengagement symptoms of burnout (Demerouti et al., 2003). Demerouti et al. (2003) suggest the OLBI is a more valid measure of burnout because it excludes personal accomplishment and focuses on the two main dimensions of burnout. Additionally, the OLBI utilizes a combination of positive and negative items to promote greater validity in test items. However, Qiao and Schaufeli (2011) conducted a test of convergent validity and found that positive items lead to misinterpretation because they do not fit the same model as negatively worded items. Despite the limitations identified, this inventory has been useful for studies investigating the phenomenon of burnout as a syndrome, rather than an extension of exhaustion (Demerouti et al., 2003).

Shirom-Melamed Burnout Measure

The Shirom-Melamed Burnout Measure (SMBM; Shirom & Melamed, 2006) expanded a single dimension of exhaustion to measure the physical, cognitive, and emotional types of resource depletion. This measure has positively correlated with the emotional exhaustion subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach et al., 1997), but it does not account for the other dimensions of burnout and does not take into consideration the context of the stress (e.g. occupation type) (Qiao & Schaufeli, 2011).

Burnout Measure

The Burnout Measure, Short Version (BM; Malach-Pines, 2005) was developed as a burnout measure that uses a single dimension of burnout and claims to incorporate three aspects of burnout (i.e. withdrawal, tired, importance of work). A study of construct validity between the MBI and BM found the measured items correlated more closely with the MBI's Emotional Exhaustion subscale and other measures of stress. The predominant criticism for measuring burnout through the lens of a single dimension is the inconsistent theoretical framework and risk of overlapping with other stress variables (Schaufeli & van Dierendonck, 1993). It is recommended that the BM be considered an instrument of "general index of psychological strain" rather than of burnout (Qiao & Schaufeli, 2011, p. 91).

Prevalence

While different types of health and human service workers experience a variety of work-related stressors, research has determined that burnout occurs across occupations (Maslach et al., 2001). Overall, health and human service workers are at a greater risk for developing burnout symptoms than the general population due to the nature of their helping profession (Cimiotti et al., 2012; Morse et al., 2012). A systematic review of research on emergency room nurses found an average of 26% of nurses reported burnout (Adriaenssens et al., 2015; Cooper et al., 2016). A review of burnout in mental health professionals found prevalence rates ranging from 20% to 60% (Paris & Hoge, 2010). Morse et al. (2012) found up to 67% of mental health professionals experience burnout. A more recent systematic review of literature on psychotherapists identified 54.5% of psychotherapists reported moderate-high stress of burnout (Simionato & Simpson, 2018).

Despite this alarming rate of burnout in psychotherapists, there is a limited body of knowledge addressing burnout within mental health professionals specifically, as opposed to other health care professionals (West, 2015).

Personal and Professional Impact

The development of burnout in mental health professionals has a detrimental impact on the personal well-being of the professional and the quality of service delivered throughout the community. Turnover rates for substance abuse counselors was 31% for clinicians and 19% for clinical supervisors (Garner et al., 2012). Kim (2015) found significant mediating effects of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization symptoms on the risk of hospital employees' intention for turnover, despite job motivation. Increased turnover within a mental health agency significantly reduces fidelity of evidence-based treatment implementation and negatively impacts client outcomes (Woltmann et al., 2008).

In addition to negative impacts on client outcomes and organizational structures, the chronic stress associated with psychotherapists' work takes a personal toll on their well-being. Burnout symptoms substantially impact the psychological health of the worker, such as an increased risk for depression symptoms (Schonfeld et al., 2018). Somatic flu-like and gastroenteritis symptoms were some of the physical symptoms found in social workers, who endorsed greater emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, two of the main symptoms of burnout (Acker, 2010). Additionally, negative impacts of emotional exhaustion were linked to family distress and marital discord (Hall et al., 2010).

Risk Factors

Comprehensive literature reviews of research investigating burnout in mental health professionals show that both intrinsic and environmental risk factors contribute to development (Lee et al., 2011; Simionato & Simpson, 2018). In fact, research surrounding the development of burnout rarely, if ever, suggested a single influencing stressor, but rather a culmination of multiple risk factors. Simionato and Simpson's (2018) review of the literature identified consistent findings that the emotional exhaustion subscale of the MBI-HSS (Maslach et al., 1997) was the most indicative of burnout among psychotherapists, and it was the most commonly reported symptom across studies.

Intrinsic Risk Factors

In general, demographic and personality character traits are categorized as intrinsic risk factors. Personal risk factors associated with burnout include younger age (Hardiman & Simmonds, 2013; Simionato & Simpson, 2018), and less work experience (Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006). However, studies that have examined the relationship of gender on burnout have been inconclusive; moreover, most studies listed within a meta-analysis of burnout research identified no association between gender and burnout (Simionato & Simpson, 2018). It is noteworthy to mention that while one gender may not be at greater risk for burnout than another, the presentation of burnout development could be different between genders (Houkes et al., 2011; Ran, 2018). For example, Houkes et al. (2011) examined burnout development in physicians and found that females were more likely to experience emotional depletion prior to cynicism and loss of personal accomplishment; however, males initially presented with cynicism and then emotional

exhaustion but never reported a loss of personal accomplishment. Gender differences in the presentation or development of burnout in mental health counselors are unclear.

Personality factors significantly contributing to burnout included over-involvement in client problems (Rzeszutek & Schier, 2014), perfectionism (D'Souza et al., 2011; Kovach-Clark et al., 2009), neuroticism (Lent & Schwartz, 2012), and emotion or avoidant-focused coping strategies (Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006). However, these risk factors alone are not necessarily indicative of burnout. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight due to the influence of each intrinsic characteristic on an individual's response to a work-related stressor.

Environmental Risk Factors

Despite an individual having little power to change systemic risk factors, it is important to note researchers who have identified specific environmental and organizational characteristics that were influential in burnout symptoms developing in helping professionals. Thomas et al. (2014) found that high caseloads contributed to burnout symptomology. Furthermore, researchers specified that the complexity of the caseload (e.g. comorbidity and clinical severity) for many counselors posed greater risk for burnout (Aarons et al., 2009). Supervisory support within an organization posed certain risks, specifically low perceived supervisor support (Day et al., 2017) and low job control or autonomy (Day et al., 2017). Additionally, counselors working in community mental health organizations were at greater risk for experiencing burnout symptoms than counselors working in private practice settings (Gaal, 2010; Lent & Schwartz, 2012).

Maslach et al. (2001) described the significance of occupational differences on the presentation of burnout symptoms. Despite identified differences in work stressors and

environments, burnout experiences for helping professionals have historically been measured together (West, 2015). Maslach et al. (2001) highlighted the importance for professionals to feel they are receiving reciprocal benefits for the responsibilities they provide in their role. Reciprocal benefits of a mental health professional's work environment may include perceived social support (Rzeszutek & Schier, 2014) and effective clinical supervision (Edwards et al., 2006). The unique differentiation of mental health professionals' work as opposed to other helping professionals is the specific job demands related to engaging in emotionally intensive work (Boyd et al., 2015; Dasgupta, 2013; Maslach et al., 2001; Sweeney et al., 2002; Zapf et al., 2001). While these duties have independent demands, most counselors are responsible for more than one role (Dasgupta, 2013; Sweeney et al., 2002). This can lead to difficulty organizing appropriate support within a single work environment.

Another environmental difference includes where the professional is engaging in work tasks (e.g. field, clinic, inpatient, or mixed) and the type of organizational structure in which they work (e.g. non-profit, government-run, for-profit organizations, and for-profit self-employed). Results from one study found greater job satisfaction reported in employee assistance program staff who were employed by external agencies versus internal agencies (Sweeney et al., 2002). This suggests little research has compared the effects of organizational differences among a single occupation. Researchers have called for future studies to investigate the mediating effects of work environment on burnout (Allan et al., 2019).

Protective Factors

Some counselors do not experience burnout, which suggests individual protective factors are likely differences that could guide future models of burnout development, prevention, and treatment. Protective factors, such as political skill, appear to protect employees from the effects of burnout despite experiencing poor supervision (Li et al., 2016). This indicates the promotion of individual strengths could support counseling professionals from experiencing burnout. The following section reviews the topic of character strengths and how they could play a role in protecting against burnout.

Character Strengths and Burnout

Current research on burnout predictors have focused on risk factors with limited emphasis on individual strengths protecting workers from burnout development (Allan et al., 2019; Swider & Zimmerman, 2010). The exploration of strengths as a valuable construct in the psychological sciences began with the boom of positive psychology (Seligman, 2002). The term *character strength* is most consistently defined by leaders in positive psychology as, “psychological ingredients—processes or mechanisms—that define the virtues. Said another way, they are distinguishable routes to displaying one or another of the virtues” (Peterson, 2006, p. 30). From this definition, Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed an instrument that identifies 24-character strengths grouped within six virtues called the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This instrument has been measured internationally and within all 50 U.S. states to identify prevalence of character strengths within each region and ultimately suggested universal character requirements for a functioning society (Park et al., 2006). It is important to note the limitations of generalizability and inherent meaning from the

correlative data (Park et al., 2006). A substantial number of research articles have utilized this instrument in various subjects to explore the relationship of character strengths on life satisfaction and meaning-making (Allan, 2015; Bruna et al., 2019).

Throughout further examination of character strengths, Peterson and Seligman (2004) described the most utilized strengths to be identified as *signature strengths*. These strengths are considered particularly important to be aware of and grow in order to promote a more meaningful life. These strengths consist of the highest three to seven strengths on the VIA-IS (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Within the last three years, researchers have examined the use of signature strengths within the context of work (Littman-Ovadia et al., 2017). Specifically, 1,031 working individuals across various countries completed the VIA instrument online through the public website and after receiving their results were offered to complete an additional battery of questionnaires that measured signature strengths, various work outcomes (e.g. work meaning, work engagement, job satisfaction, work performance, organizational citizenship behavior, counterproductive work behaviors), and positive affect. The findings of this study connected the use of signature strengths to positive work outcomes and improved meaningfulness at work (Littman-Ovadia et al., 2017).

The positive correlation between the use of signature strengths on meaningfulness and engagement at work sparked an interest into the inquiry of the effects of strengths on burnout. More specifically, an extension of the previous study explored the specific character strengths found among counselors and their relationship to burnout and meaningful work (Allan et al., 2019). Allan et al. (2019) found a sample of 324 mental health professionals reported significantly higher levels of 13 specific character strengths

than the normed sample. Furthermore, a structural equation model identified which strengths significantly predicted meaningful work and burnout. The results concluded that a mental health professional utilizing caution, while providing counsel to others and displaying excitement for their work, is likely to experience greater meaningfulness in their work, which in turn reduces the feelings of burnout. This study is significant to the field of counselor burnout because it suggests practical implications for the use of strengths-focused interventions to promote meaningful work and ultimately addressing burnout.

Meaningful Work and Burnout

Researchers have begun examining the influence of existential theory in a variety of professions (e.g. nursing, psychology, substance abuse counseling) (Steger & Shin, 2010). Steger and Shin (2010) found that the principles of existentialism compliment the explicit job demands of health care professionals who hold space for clients presenting with emotional distress and suffering. Pines (2000) used a case study example to depict that the cause of burnout is founded on the human need to believe life has meaning and actions taken are useful. When individuals believe they have failed in their efforts to promote a legacy, they are more likely to experience burnout.

Individuals have a strong desire to engage in meaningful work (Steger et al., 2013). Allan et al. (2016) showed meaning-making is a moderating factor against work stress. Meaning-making also has an inverse relationship with depression symptoms and a positive correlation with calling and work satisfaction (Steger et al., 2012). Researchers examined organizational nostalgia and found that employees endorsing high burnout were less likely to have intentions of turnover if meaningful work was promoted

(Leunissen et al., 2018). This suggests promising evidence for the protective nature of meaning-making within work to reduce burnout symptoms. Existential fulfillment also has a significant indirect association on burnout symptoms (Loonstra et al., 2009). Specifically, self-transcendence contributed significantly to personal efficacy scales. These findings led to the recommendation for Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) techniques that focus on existential themes to mitigate the presentation of burnout.

While most burnout interventions are designed to target symptoms of stress through Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) or Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), a recent intervention for burnout symptoms focused on addressing existential significance and personal growth in the workplace (van Dierendonck et al., 2005). In the evaluation of this intervention, researchers invited participants employed within major engineering companies to participate in a ten-day training across a three-month span that utilized transpersonal psychology to promote existential meaning and personal growth. The quasi-experimental design utilized pre, post, and six-month follow up measurements. The intervention group was not randomized; however, the intervention group measures were compared with a comparison group, which consisted of participants who matched on demographic variables but did not receive the intervention. Results identified that the intervention group was effective in reducing burnout and enhancing purpose and meaning in life. Burnout development is different than traditional work-related stress and the burnout intervention above acknowledges those differences (van Dierendonck et al., 2005). The findings of this intervention further justify the benefits of evaluating

existential-related protective factors and interventions for burnout on mental health professionals.

Measuring Meaningful Work

Existential theory presents with few quantitative instruments to measure the construct of meaningfulness. With the integration of positive psychology, an empirically-based perspective, to existential psychotherapy, a philosophically-based theory, there has been an increased interest within the past decade to quantify and measure meaning (Wong, 2009). Existential positive psychologists have acknowledged the importance, but also notated the caution needed when attempting to measure a very subjective construct (Wong, 2012). Despite these obstacles, multiple instruments have been developed to measure meaning in life, such as the Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (George & Park, 2016) and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006). While there are numerous instruments developed in the last decade to measure meaning, there are few follow-up studies that have confirmed the reliability and validity of those instruments. This section will provide a brief review of the Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI; Steger et al., 2012) that is predominately cited and holds the most information regarding reliability and validity of the instrument.

Work as Meaning Inventory

Steger et al. (2012) developed The Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI; Steger et al., 2012) to measure the construct of meaningful work, and used a factor-analysis from data collected by participants within the United States to identify three major themes most commonly associated with meaningful work. The first theme refers to *positive meaning* (PM), the concept that an employee feels that their work has value and is

meaningful. *Meaning making through work* (MM) refers to the positive impact that one's life work has on their legacy. Lastly, *greater good motivations* (GG) describe the influence that one's work has on the community and well-being of others. These researchers found positive correlations with the WAMI and one's sense of calling, organizational citizenship, career commitment, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to work, and meaning in life. Symptoms negatively correlated with the WAMI include; depression, anxiety, hostility scales, and one's intentions to leave their organization. In another study, meaningful work measured in psychologically-trained oncologists practicing in China used the WAMI to identify an indirect association between meaningful work and depersonalization symptoms (He et al., 2017). Overall, the WAMI supports the theoretical foundation of existential positive psychology to comprehensively examine the construct of meaningful work as it encompasses each of the three themes described above.

Summary

The prevalence and impact of burnout on counselors signifies the need for the current study to investigate the variables that may address and protect against burnout (Allan et al., 2019; Simionato & Simpson, 2018). Risk factors and protective factors identified for burnout supported the existential framework of meaning-making, in the predictive nature of burnout at work. Burnout research has been investigated across occupation types for many decades; however, there is still work to be done to explore the syndrome of burnout in counselors. This dissertation expanded the study conducted by Allan et al. (2019) in three specific ways. First, I compiled additional samples of counselor strengths to compare to the normed means in order to verify and expand upon

the original findings. Second, my model included the variable work environment as recommended by Allan et al. (2019) for future research. Finally, I used the MBI-HSS subscales, as opposed to the original study's use of the BM. This modification allowed the model to provide a more detailed inquiry into the relationship of character strengths, work environment, and meaningful work on each of the three dimensions of burnout, as opposed to reducing the construct of burnout to a single composite score, which upholds the theory of the multidimensional model of burnout described above. The next chapter will review the methodology used to design the quantitative research study, including reliability and validity of the instrumentation used, research implementation procedures, data collection, and data analysis.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This dissertation explored the relationship of character strengths and work environment on burnout, as mediated by meaningful work, in a sample of counselors. Specifically, this study explored the most salient character strengths in counselors compared to population means. Additionally, this study determined the character strengths and work environments that predict dimensions of burnout and meaningful work among a sample of counselors. Furthermore, the degree to which meaningful work mediated the relationship between character strengths and work environment on burnout was examined. This chapter is organized into the following sections: (a) research design, (b) selection of participants, (c) instrumentation, (d) data collection, and (e) data analysis.

Research Design

The research design for this study built upon the recent research of Allan et al. (2019) by analyzing the relationship between the latent independent variables (character strengths, meaningful work, and work environment) on the latent dependent variable (burnout). The design responded to the areas of future research by including work environment as a variable (Allan et al., 2019). This study used a cross-sectional, quantitative design because the data was gathered through self-report measures that provided quantitative information about participants at a single point in time. Additionally, using a non-experimental, within-subjects design I instructed all participants to complete the same instruments in the same order, meaning that the independent variables were not manipulated in any way. The use of a non-experimental,

descriptive design supported the examination of variables as they exist in their present environment (Heppner et al., 2016).

Participants

The participants for this study were invited through e-mail using voluntary response sampling. In order to obtain a comprehensive sample of participants, the researcher utilized contact information identified on public websites of counseling-related professionals within private practice, community mental health, and university settings across the United States. Furthermore, the researcher shared the invitation for research across various counseling-related Facebook groups targeted for mental health professionals across the United States. Finally, the researcher reached out to relevant professional organizations and community agencies within the disciplines of counseling, marriage and family therapy, social work, and psychology and requested these organizations distribute the survey invitation amongst their members and staff. The researcher also used snowball sampling to encourage participants to share the survey with colleagues who may have met inclusion criteria.

According to Kline (2011), the minimum sample size necessary to conduct a structural equation model is 200 participants; however, the minimum sample size increases based on the number of parameters observed for the model. Schumacker and Lomax (2016) reported 10 – 20 participants per variable as sufficient to produce an adequate sample size. Due to the number of parameters for the following model, the researcher sought to obtain a minimum of 300 participants. The target population included individuals currently working as individuals who held active licensure or were supervised by a licensed counselor. This population included graduate students

completing practicum and internship. Participants were not be excluded based on discipline, licensure type, state of licensure, age, ethnic background, or sex.

Data Collection

The data was collected following approval from the dissertation committee and from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Sam Houston State University. Participants received an invitation to participate through an introductory e-mail or public Facebook post with a flyer including a link to Qualtrics. This link directed participants to the informed consent. Due to the anonymous nature of the online survey, consent was obtained electronically without the provision of identifying information. Once these individuals consented to participate, they were given a participant identification number and directed to the survey instruments.

The data collection process closely followed the procedures outlined by Allan et al. (2019), except this study was able to integrate the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) into the survey with the other instruments. This adjustment helped reduce participant transcription error because the participants were able to answer the questions within the survey rather than transcribing the results of the VIA-IS into the Qualtrics page. This also provided the raw data for each individual question response to ensure validation of scores.

Instrumentation

This study used quantitative self-report measures and a researcher-made demographic questionnaire to collect the data. The demographic questionnaire gathered specific information on individual and occupational characteristics of participants. The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) was used to identify the top five-

character strengths and the raw scores of each character strength. The Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI) provided a composite score of meaningful work through three facets of meaning. Furthermore, the Maslach Burnout Inventory – Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS) measured three dimensions of burnout.

Demographic Questionnaire

The demographic questionnaire was specifically developed for the purposes of this study to gather information on the composition of the sample population. This questionnaire fulfilled two necessary purposes. Firstly, the questionnaire ensures that the participants meet inclusion criteria. Secondly, the questionnaire supplies information regarding the work environment variable. Participants were asked to indicate their (a) age, (b) ethnicity, (c) sex, (d) licensure/degree, (e) work environment, (f) and years of experience. Exact age was requested using a single textbox allowing no more than two digits. Due to the variability of licensure titles across different states, licensure data was collected using an open textbox answer. Students who did not hold active licensure were asked to enter their expected degree title and specify via checkbox if they were in practicum or internship. Participants were asked to identify their current work environment using a list from which a single environment could be selected from each list. The first list included: individual private practice, group private practice, non-profit/charitable organization, local mental health authority/governmental organization/community health, university counseling setting, privately funded hospital/clinic, residential treatment facility/group home, and jail/prison/detention center. The second list included: field-based (the counselor meets the client in their home or community), clinic-based (the client meets the counselor within an established office

setting), or inpatient (the client lives within the location the counselor works at to meet with the client). Finally, years of experience data was collected using a single textbox allowing no more than two digits.

Work as Meaning Inventory

Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI; Steger et al., 2012) is a 10-item scale that was used to measure three subconstructs that captured the perception that an individual's work has meaning. The WAMI used subscales for positive meaning (PM; 4 questions), meaning making through work (MM; 3 questions), and greater good motivations (GG; 5 questions) (Steger et al., 2012). An example item for the positive meaning subscale was "I have found a meaningful career." An example item for meaning making through work and great good contributions subscale included "I view my work as contributing to my personal growth" and "I know my work makes a positive difference in the world," respectively. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale in which 1 was "Absolutely Untrue" and 5 was "Absolutely True." The WAMI provided a composite score for Meaningful Work (MW). Previous reliability measures identified an α ranging from 0.82 to 0.89 for subscale scores and 0.93 for the composite WAMI score (Steger et al., 2012).

Maslach Burnout Inventory – Human Service Survey

The Maslach Burnout Inventory – Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS; Maslach et al., 1997) is a 22-item survey that was used to evaluate three subconstructs of burnout in counselors. The MBI-HSS has been determined to be the gold standard instrument for measuring burnout and is the most widely used instrument in research on burnout (Lee et al., 2011; Simionato & Simpson, 2018). The subscales included emotional exhaustion (EE; 9 items), depersonalization (DP; 5 items), and personal accomplishment (PA; 8

items). Sample items for EE and DP respectively included “I feel frustrated by my job” and “I feel recipients blame me for some of their problems.” An example question for the personal accomplishment subscale was “I feel like I’m positively influencing other people’s lives through my work.” Participants rated work-related opinions on a 7-point Likert scale in which 0 indicated “Never” and 7 indicated “Every day.” The range of burnout experienced was measured by the following low to high scale: EE (0 – 27), DP (0 – 13), PA (reverse scored; 56 – 0). Maslach et al. (1997) reported that burnout was identified by higher scores of EE and DP and lower scores of PA. Previous studies have reported a reliability for this measure (EE; $\alpha = 0.90$), (DP; $\alpha = 0.79$), (PA; $\alpha = 0.71$), as well as convergent and divergent validity (Maslach et al., 1997; Schutte et al., 2000).

Values in Action – Inventory of Strengths

The 120-item Values in Action – Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) measured individual character strengths. The VIA-IS used a 5-point Likert scale in which 1 indicated “Very Much Unlike Me” to 5 which indicated “Very Much Like Me” in order to assess the degree of 24-character strengths. Examples of items found in the VIA-IS included “I am never too busy to help a friend” and “I always keep my promises.” The 24 character strengths measured included: appreciation of beauty and excellence, bravery, creativity, curiosity, fairness, forgiveness, gratitude, honesty, hope, humility, humor, judgment, kindness, leadership, love, love of learning, perseverance, perspective, prudence, self-regulation, social intelligence, spirituality, teamwork, and zest. Test-retest reliability ($r > .70$) and acceptable internal consistencies ($\alpha > .70$) were found in previous research for all 24-character strengths (Peterson &

Seligman, 2004). Following data analysis, the reliability measures for the data collected was reported.

Data Analysis

In preparation for analyzing the data, descriptive statistics were examined to determine the means, standard deviations, and correlations of the 24 measured character strengths, meaningful work, work environment, and the three subscales of burnout (i.e. emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment). The data was examined for any patterns of missing data, outliers, skewness, kurtosis, and normality. Few participants had missing data points and, to ensure authenticity of results, participants with any missing data were removed from the final analysis. The analysis of the data followed Thompson's (2000) best practices for conducting SEM, which included meeting multivariate normality assumptions.

One-Sample *t*-Tests

The raw data collected from the VIA-IS was used to conduct a one-sample *t*-test to compare the average character strengths of counselors to the established norms sample of 5,541,052 adults (VIA Institute of Character, 2020). Statistically significant results for items found in this study were compared to the character strengths identified by Allan et al. (2019). Furthermore, the character strengths used for the final model were determined using a correlation matrix in order to identify which character strengths significantly correlated with meaningful work and burnout subscales. These identified character strengths were included in the final mediation model described below.

Structural Equation Modeling

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to identify a significant relationship between latent variables (Hurley et al., 1997; Schumacker & Lomax, 2016). The latent variables for the model were composed of character strengths that were significantly correlated to the burnout subscales and meaningful work composite score. Latent variables were developed for meaningful work and burnout through the Work as Meaning Inventory subscale scores and the Maslach Burnout Inventory – Human Service Survey subscales, respectively. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was not necessary because the number and type of latent variables were already determined by the study's hypothesis and the validity of the instruments used to compose the latent variables. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to identify the construct validity of the latent variables within the models. Once the latent variables were defined and determined to not be related to each other, the fit indices were used to evaluate fit of the data to the hypothesized model (See Figure 1).

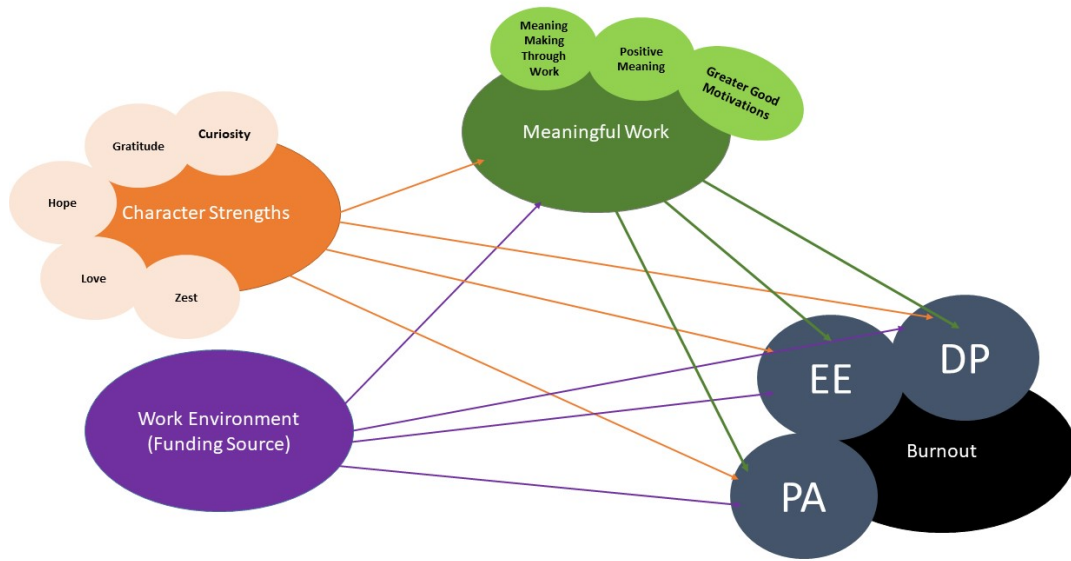


Figure 1

Hypothesized SEM. Character strengths and work environment will be replaced with the specific items identified through the confirmatory factor analysis.

Schumacker and Lomax (2016) recommended the use of model fit indices of chi-square test (χ^2), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root mean residual (SRMR) for most models. This allowed me to determine the variance-covariance fit of the data to the structural equation model. An acceptable model-fit index for CFI ($CFI \geq .90 - .95$) and RMSEA ($RMSEA \leq .10 - .08$) ranged between less conservative to more conservative cutoffs based on sample size and model complexity (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Schumacker & Lomax, 2016; Weston & Gore, 2006). Additional fit indices for model comparison using comparative fit index (CFI) were conducted to compare the improvements between a least restrictive model (no fit) and a model with perfect fit (the proposed theoretical model).

Summary

The purpose of this study was to analyze the relationships among character strengths, work environment, and meaningful work on burnout among counselors. This purpose drove the methodology and used structural equation modeling to analyze data. Data was collected using an online survey distributed across the United States to counselors from various licensures in the fields of counseling, psychology, and social work. Three well-validated instruments (VIA-IS, WAMI, and MBI-HSS) and a demographic questionnaire were used. The analysis of the data explored the degree to which salient character strengths predict meaningful work and/or burnout, as well as the direct and indirect effects of character strengths, work environment, and meaningful work on burnout within mediation models. The remaining chapters will detail the results of the data analysis and the discussion of the findings.

CHAPTER IV

Results

The following chapter provides the results of the statistical analysis examining the three research questions proposed for this study. Additional information will be provided regarding the demographics of the study participants and the data cleaning process.

Assumptions of normality for the following data set will also be outlined in preparation for the discussion of the results for each research question. The statistical results of each research question will be described below, as well as the steps for the mediation model.

Data Cleaning

Data collection for the following online survey was available from July 2020 to October 2020. Data collection was then closed with a total of 667 participants selecting the survey link. Of those participants, 238 did not complete the informed consent, 25 reported that they did not currently work in one of the counseling-related fields listed, and 1 selected they would not consent and did not complete the survey. A remaining 404 participants completed the survey and reported meeting inclusion criteria. Of the 404 participants, 5 participants were excluded from the analysis because survey questions were left unanswered. Participants who completed all survey instruments, including the work environment questions within the demographic questionnaire, but chose not to answer demographic questions (i.e. age) remained for data analysis. Following data cleaning, there were no participants in the final analysis with missing data.

New variables for subscale scores were computed based on the scoring key provided by the instruments' publishers. In order to accomplish this, one negatively worded item in the Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI; Steger et al., 2012) was reverse

coded to allow for analysis with positively worded items and generated the subscale score for Greater Good Motivations. Value ranges were reviewed and no values fell outside of the expected range. The following variables were computed during data cleaning based on the raw scores: *Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI*; Maslach et al., 1997) *Subscales* (Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Depersonalization (DP), Personal Accomplishment (PA)); *Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI*; Steger et al., 2012) *Subscales* (Personal Meaning(PA), Meaning-Making Through Work(MM), Greater Good Motivations(GG)); *Values In Action (VIA*; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) *Strengths* (Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, Bravery, Creativity, Curiosity, Fairness, Forgiveness, Gratitude, Honesty, Hope, Humility, Humor, Judgment, Kindness, Leadership, Love, Love of Learning, Perseverance, Perspective, Prudence, Self-Regulation, Social Intelligence, Spirituality, Teamwork, and Zest). The computed subscale variables listed above were necessary to proceed with the following analyses.

Participant Demographics

Following four months of data collection, 399 participants completed the survey instruments to its entirety, which exceeded the sample size minimum requirements (Kline, 2011). The average age of participants was 38.69 years ($SD = 11.19$) with an average of 7.91 years ($SD = 7.26$) of experience in the profession. Participants identified as 92.2% female, 6.3% male, and 1.5% non-binary. Table 1 below displays additional demographics, including: ethnicity, licensure status, field of discipline, work environment funding source, and work environment location.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Demographic	Frequency
Ethnicity	
Asian	2.8%
Black or African American	7.8%
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	11.8%
Middle Eastern or North African	1.0%
White	72.4%
Multiple races and/or ethnicities	3.3%
Another race or ethnicity not listed above	1.0%
Licensure Status	
Independently Practicing Clinician	64.2%
Supervised Clinician (Post-Graduate)	27.1%
Practicum Student	2.5%
Internship Student	6.0%
Field of Discipline	
Psychology	13.5%
Counseling	47.9%
Marriage and Family Therapy	10.0%
Social Work	28.6%
Work Environment – Location	
Field-Based	18.5%
Clinic-Based	72.7%
Inpatient	8.8%

[Continued]

Demographic	Frequency
Work Environment – Funding Source	
Individual Private Practice	26.3%
Group Private Practice	15.5%
Non-Profit/Charitable Organization	20.3%
Local Mental Health Authority	19.0%
University Counseling Setting	5.0%
Privately-Funded Hospital/Clinic	8.3%
Residential Treatment Facility/Group Home	3.5%
Jail/Prison/Detention Center	2.0%

Note. $n = 399$ for all variables

Normality of Data and Assumptions

Prior to the completion of the statistical analyses, the data was examined for normality. Because a univariate and multivariate analyses were conducted, the assumptions for multivariate normality were examined. Four assumptions of a multivariate analysis were conducted: (a) multivariate outliers, (b), linearity, (c) normality for univariate variables, and (d) homoscedasticity. Multicollinearity, a high correlation between two or more predictor variables, was also reviewed.

Mahalanobis' Distance was calculated by determining the degrees of freedom (12 predictor variables minus one) at a p -value of less than 0.001. This determined if there were any multivariate outliers. Five multivariate outliers exceeded a Chi-square of 31.264, but were not removed from the final analysis because upon review it was determined the respondents appeared to have answered honestly. A scatterplot of the variables composed of interval data indicated assumptions of linearity were met because the scores were generally elliptical in shape. The histogram for the MBI EE subscale and

the WAMI PM and MM subscales were normally distributed. The histogram for MBI DP was positive skewed and the histograms for MBI PA and WAMI GG were negatively skewed suggesting non-normally distributed data.

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov (KS) was $p < 0.05$ for all predictor variables which indicated the data did not meet the criteria for normality. However, to further determine if the data was normally distributed, z -scores were calculated for skewness and kurtosis. Skewness and kurtosis values were divided by their standard error to produce standardized skewness and kurtosis coefficients. Calculations identified approximately 58% of z -scores (37 of the 64 total standardized coefficients) were within the limits of ± 3.00 , indicating a reasonable indication of normally distributed data (Mertler & Reinhart, 2010).

Homoscedasticity (equal variances for all variables), was not indicated for all dependent variables because some scatterplots were clustered in certain areas. Meaning that the assumption for homoscedasticity was not met. Finally, Tolerance values and the variance inflation factor (VIF) were calculated to determine the presence of multicollinearity. All Tolerance values were < 1 and VIF was < 10 , indicating that there were no concerns of multicollinearity (Mertler & Reinhart, 2010).

Despite not meeting all assumptions of normality, I proceeded with the analyses using the following rationales:

1. This data set used a large sample size, which improved the probability of achieving statistically significant results. When a large sample size is used, the assumptions for normality and homogeneity of variance are commonly violated (Thompson, 2000).

2. The use of *t*-tests and regressions can be used even when the data are not normally distributed (Lumley et al., 2002).
3. The Central Limit Theorem states the average of a large number of independent random variables is approximately normally distributed around the true population mean (Lumley et al., 2002; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Salient Counselor Character Strengths

The first research question inquired: *What are the most salient character strengths in counselors compared to population means?* To answer this question, I first collected the established norms for a sample of 5,541,052 American adults who completed the Values In Action – Inventory of Strengths (VIA Institute of Character, 2020). The established norms were grouped by gender and required a weighted calculation of means and standard deviations before they could be compared to the counselor sample. Next, I conducted a one-sample *t*-test using the weighted means for each character strength as the test value to compare population norms with my sample of counselor character strengths. Bootstrapping at 2,000 iterations was included in the statistical analysis to generate a more accurate estimate of confidence intervals with greater rigor. The following character strengths were statistically significantly higher than the population norms ($p < .001$): bravery ($d = .34$), fairness ($d = .41$), gratitude ($d = .29$), honesty ($d = .22$), judgment ($d = .41$), love of learning ($d = .24$), perspective ($d = .38$), and social intelligence ($d = .36$). The normed sample was statistically significantly higher on self-regulation ($d = .49$) and teamwork ($d = .30$) than the counselor sample in this study.

Table 2*The t-Tests Comparing Counselor Character Strengths Means to Population Norms*

Character Strengths	Counselors	Population Norm	T Statistic	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Beauty	3.83 (.72)	3.81 (.78)	0.57	0.03
Bravery	3.80 (.56)	3.61 (.73)	6.85	0.34*
Creativity	3.80 (.69)	3.75 (.76)	1.56	0.07
Curiosity	3.73 (.68)	3.82 (.68)	-2.64	-0.13*
Fairness	4.31 (.44)	4.13 (.60)	8.31	0.41*
Forgiveness	3.63 (.66)	3.65 (.76)	-0.62	-0.03
Gratitude	4.01 (.64)	3.82 (.73)	5.95	0.29*
Honesty	4.39 (.40)	4.30 (.53)	4.42	0.22*
Hope	3.83 (.64)	3.74 (.75)	2.76	0.15
Humility	3.53 (.68)	3.51 (.73)	0.66	0.03
Humor	4.03 (.65)	3.93 (.75)	3.15	0.16
Judgment	4.29 (.49)	4.09 (.61)	8.16	0.41*
Kindness	4.17 (.51)	4.18 (.58)	-0.21	-0.01
Leadership	3.88 (.52)	3.87 (.64)	0.26	0.01
Love	4.06 (.70)	4.00 (.71)	1.79	0.09
Learning	3.76 (.78)	3.57 (.82)	4.95	0.24*
Perseverance	3.85 (.68)	3.77 (.77)	2.49	0.13
Perspective	3.99 (.57)	3.77 (.70)	7.73	0.38*
Prudence	3.75 (.67)	3.69 (.73)	1.56	0.09
Self-Regulation	2.87 (.79)	3.25 (.77)	-9.73	-0.49*
Social Intelligence	4.05 (.51)	3.87 (.66)	7.14	0.36*
Spirituality	3.31 (1.16)	3.24 (1.06)	1.20	0.06
Teamwork	3.66 (.57)	3.83 (.64)	-6.10	-0.30*
Zest	3.50 (.68)	3.57 (.77)	-2.02	-0.11

* $p < .001$.

Relationships Between Variables

The second research question examined: *Which character strengths and work environments were most related to meaningful work and burnout among the counselor sample?* The purpose of the research question was to measure the association between multiple quantitative variables. Because identifying the best predictors was not required to answer this research question, a Pearson correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationship between 24 character strengths and work environment categorization.

Work environment was measured in two separate ways: the organization's funding source (i.e. individual private practice, non-profit, etc. . .) and the employee's work location (i.e. clinic-based, field-based, inpatient). Table 3 in Appendix B displays descriptive statistics for each variable found to have a statistically significant relationship ($p < .001$) to all dependent variable subscales. The correlation matrix displayed in Table 3 also identifies a statistically significant relationship for five of the 24 character strengths with all three burnout subscales and all three meaningful work subscales. The work environment question examining funding source had a statistically significant relationship with burnout and meaningful work subscale variables. The effect size for all variables ranged from a medium to large effect size across study variables ($r^2 = 41\% - 64\%$).

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and Factor Correlations for Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. EE	-											
2. DP	.60*	-										
3. PA	-.32*	-.37*	-									
4. PM	-.48*	-.41*	.48*	-								
5. MM	-.33*	-.28*	.41*	.70*	-							
6. GG	.38*	-.38*	.36*	.69*	.54*	-						
7. Curiosity	-.20*	-.24*	.28*	.23*	.23*	.17*	-					
8. Gratitude	-.22*	-.27*	.30*	.36*	.24*	.27*	.45*	-				
9. Hope	-.25*	-.24*	.33*	.31*	.23*	.22*	.46*	.60*	-			
10. Love	-.18*	-.19*	.27*	.28*	.22*	.20*	.38*	.41*	.44*	-		
11. Zest	-.40*	-.27*	.40*	.41*	.33*	.30*	.59*	.53*	.64*	.43*	-	
12. Work	.30*	.29*	-.20*	-.23*	-.17*	-.19*	-.20*	-.09	.07	.08	-.15	-
<i>M</i>	3.6	1.98	5.98	17.84	12.89	13.38	3.73	4.01	3.83	4.06	3.49	1.53
<i>SD</i>	1.25	.93	.70	2.38	1.88	1.71	.68	.64	.64	.70	.68	.50

Note. EE = Emotional Exhaustion subscale for burnout; DP = Depersonalization subscale for burnout; PA = Personal Accomplishment subscale for burnout; PM = Personal Meaning subscale for meaningful work; MM = Meaning-Making Through Work subscale for meaningful work; GG = Greater Good Motivations subscale for meaningful work.

* $p < .001$

Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA)

Once statistically significant correlations between study variables were identified, I conducted a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) to test the significance of group differences between the eight work environment funding source types and each of the six dependent variables. This step was done to inform the work environment groups in the upcoming mediation model. MANOVA results indicated that work environment was significantly associated with the combined dependent variables of the burnout and meaningful work subscales [Wilks' $\Lambda = .82$, $F(42, 1813) = 1.91$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$]. Multivariate effect size, the variance explained by the relationship between the variables, was small to medium (Cohen, 1998).

A post-hoc ANOVA was conducted for each dependent variable in order to evaluate the direct effects with work environment. Each ANOVA was evaluated at an alpha of .05. There was a statistically significant difference between work environments on all dependent variables: emotional exhaustion [$F(1, 391) = 6.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$], depersonalization [$F(1, 391) = 6.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$], personal accomplishment [$F(1, 391) = 2.51$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$], positive meaning [$F(1, 391) = 3.81$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$], meaning-making [$F(1, 391) = 2.37$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$], and greater good motivations [$F(1, 391) = 3.46$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$]. A Bonferroni post hoc analysis revealed similar statistically significant differences between work environment groups and each dependent variable. For example, local mental health authority ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.26$) had statistically significant differences between individual private practice ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.10$), group practice ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.07$), and university counseling setting ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.23$) in the emotional exhaustion dependent variable. Additionally, individual

private practice ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.10$) significantly differs from non-profit ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.35$) work environments in emotional exhaustion. This informed how the work environment funding source variable was categorized for the mediation model.

Based on literature surrounding the statistically significant differences in burnout and meaningful work in community mental health and private practice organizations (Gaal, 2010) and the post-hoc results described above, the work environment funding source variable was dummy-coded into two specific work environment categories. The first category comprised of individual private practice, group private practice, and university counseling setting. The second category comprised of community organizations such as: local mental health authority, non-profit, hospital/clinic, residential treatment facility/group home, and jail/prison/detention center. The dummy coded work environment variable will be referred to as *work groups* in the following mediation model.

Structural Equation Model

Structural equation modeling was used to answer the final research question: *What is the relationship of counselors' character strengths and work environment to dimensions of burnout with meaningful work as a potential mediator?* All of the following analyses were conducted using the SEM software AMOS 25. The following indices of fit were utilized to evaluate model fit: chi-square test (χ^2), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; Schumacker & Lomax, 2016). Since χ^2 is frequently not a reliable measure of good fit due to the sensitivity to sample size (Schumacker & Lomax, 2016; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013), CFI and RMSEA were examined to ensure good model fit. The CFI and RMSEA criteria

utilized to measure model fit ($CFI \geq .90$; $RMSEA \leq .10$) were examined with caution and consideration for model complexity and sample size in the model fit. Stringent cut-off scores are ill-advised when considering overall model fit and an examination of multiple fit indices are recommended (Schumacker & Lomax, 2016; Weston & Gore, 2006).

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was not necessary for the dependent variables used for the model because they were composed of adopted scales with sufficient empirical and theoretical evidence of validity (see Table 3). Hurley et al. (1997) verified that an exploratory factor analysis is not required when scale validity is previously justified. The *meaningful work* latent variable was composed of the subscales: *personal meaning* ($\alpha = .88$), *meaning-making* ($\alpha = .77$), and *greater good motivations* ($\alpha = .66$). The burnout subscales were not combined to create a latent burnout variable because the literature advises against a global composite score of burnout (Maslach, 1976). Instead, the items for each subscale composed a latent variable for each burnout subscale: *emotional exhaustion* ($\alpha = .92$), *depersonalization* ($\alpha = .74$), *personal accomplishment* ($\alpha = .76$), Cronbach's alpha for each subscale was measured as a scale of internal consistency to verify how closely related a set of items are to reliably compose the subscale within an instrument (Cronbach, 1951). All subscales had strong reliability because Cronbach's alpha was $\geq .50$. The *character strength* latent variable was composed of five character strengths identified in the research question above that had a significant relationship with all of the dependent variables listed (see Table 3). The *work groups* variable was included as an observed variable rather than a latent variable because it composed of measured data points taken from the work environments question on the demographic screening.

Full Mediation Model

The full mediation model describes the character strength latent variable and work groups variable predicting meaningful work and then predicting each of the burnout subscales (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment). The character strength latent variable did not correlate with the work groups variable. The model had less than optimal fit to the data, $\chi^2 (418) = 1160.11, p < .001$, CFI = .87, RMSEA = .067. Table 4 displays the path coefficient for each indicator that loaded on to the model's latent variables. All latent variables were composed of indicators with significant factor loading ($p < .001$), suggesting that the adopted indicator items used to develop the latent variables did not require adjustment to improve model fit.

Table 4*Path Coefficients for Indicators Loading on Latent Variables*

Path	Unstandardized Estimate	Standardized Estimates	Standard Error	<i>t</i> Statistic
WAMI ^a				
PM ^b	1.80	.95	.11	17.02**
MM ^b	1.11	.74	.08	14.54**
GG ^{bc}	1.00	.73		
EE ^a				
MBI_1 ^{bc}	1.00	.75		
MBI_2 ^b	1.05	.72	.06	19.27**
MBI_3 ^b	1.31	.80	.08	16.25**
MBI_6 ^b	1.02	.66	.08	13.21**
MBI_8 ^b	1.43	.87	.08	17.77**
MBI_13 ^b	1.21	.76	.08	15.46**
MBI_14 ^b	1.17	.67	.09	13.25**
MBI_16 ^b	0.85	.63	.07	12.46**
MBI_20 ^b	1.10	.76	.07	15.45**
DP ^a				
MBI_5 ^{bc}	1.00	.47		
MBI_10 ^b	2.79	.80	.31	9.05**
MBI_11 ^b	3.18	.85	.35	9.17**
MBI_15 ^b	1.25	.52	.15	8.29**
MBI_22 ^b	1.06	.32	.20	5.29**
PA ^a				
MBI_4 ^b	1.10	.40	.19	5.85**
MBI_7 ^b	1.31	.57	.18	7.14**
MBI_9 ^b	1.72	.67	.23	7.51**
MBI_12 ^b	1.87	.46	.30	6.34**
MBI_17 ^b	1.37	.50	.17	7.88**
MBI_18 ^b	2.11	.62	.29	7.28**
MBI_19 ^b	2.65	.71	.35	7.62**
MBI_21 ^{bc}	1.00	.45		
Character Strengths ^a				
VIA_Curious ^{bc}	1.00	.65		
VIA_Gratitude ^b	1.01	.70	.09	11.66**
VIA_Hope ^b	1.12	.78	.09	12.63**
VIA_Love ^b	0.88	.56	.09	9.63**
VIA_Zest ^b	1.27	.47	.10	13.19**

Note. WAMI = Work as Meaning Inventory; PM = Personal Meaning Subscale; MM = Meaning Making Through Work subscale; GG = Greater Good Motivations subscale; EE = Emotional Exhaustion subscale; DP = Depersonalization subscale; PA = Personal Accomplishment subscale; VIA = Values in Action Inventory of Strengths. Indicators are

[Continued]

identified by the name of the instrument and the instrument item or the composite score of that subscale (i.e. VIA_Curious indicates the composition of the curiosity questions of the VIA instrument).

^a Latent Variable. ^b Indicators ^c Factor Loading set to 1.00 to identify the model.

** $p < .001$

Partial Mediation Model

The partial mediation model allowed the character strength latent variable and work group variable to predict each burnout subscale directly through an examination of direct effects (see Figure 2). This slightly improved model fit $\chi^2 (412) = 1114.66, p < .001$, CFI = .88, RMSEA = .065. Most of the path coefficients of the hypothesized relationships were statistically significant at a p value $< .001$ (see Table 5). The path coefficient for the relationship between the Depersonalization subscale and Character Strength was statistically significant at the .01 level. The only hypothesized relationship that was not statistically significant was the Personal Accomplishment subscale of burnout on the work groups variable. This information informed the decision to proceed with a model modification that will be described further in the post-hoc model section.

Table 5*Path Coefficients for Indicators Depicting Hypothesized Relations*

Path	Unstandardized Estimate	Standardized Estimates	Standard Error	<i>t</i> Statistic
WAMI ^a				
Character Strength	1.28	.45	.18	7.24**
Work Groups	-.42	-.17	.12	-3.46**
EE ^a				
Character Strength	-.48	-.20	.14	-3.50**
Work Groups	.37	.18	.10	3.83**
WAMI	-.34	-.41	.05	-6.70**
DP ^a				
Character Strength	-.17	-.17	.06	-2.72*
Work Groups	.16	.19	.05	3.57**
WAMI	-.13	-.38	.03	-5.19**
PA ^a				
Character Strength	.19	.23	.06	3.38**
Work Groups	-.06	-.08	.04	-1.53
WAMI	.14	.47	.02	5.72**

Note. WAMI = Work as Meaning Inventory; EE = Emotional Exhaustion subscale; DP = Depersonalization subscale; PA = Personal Accomplishment subscale.

^a Latent Variable.

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$

Covariance

In order to identify any theoretically justified modifications to the proposed SEM. Large modification indices with values of 30 or greater were examined for item content similarity (Schumacker & Lomax, 2016). Items with similar content referred to indicators composing the same latent variable or similar construct (i.e. burnout). Identified items were given the ability for the residuals to correlate with one another. This can be found by the covariances allowed within the model path in Figure 2.

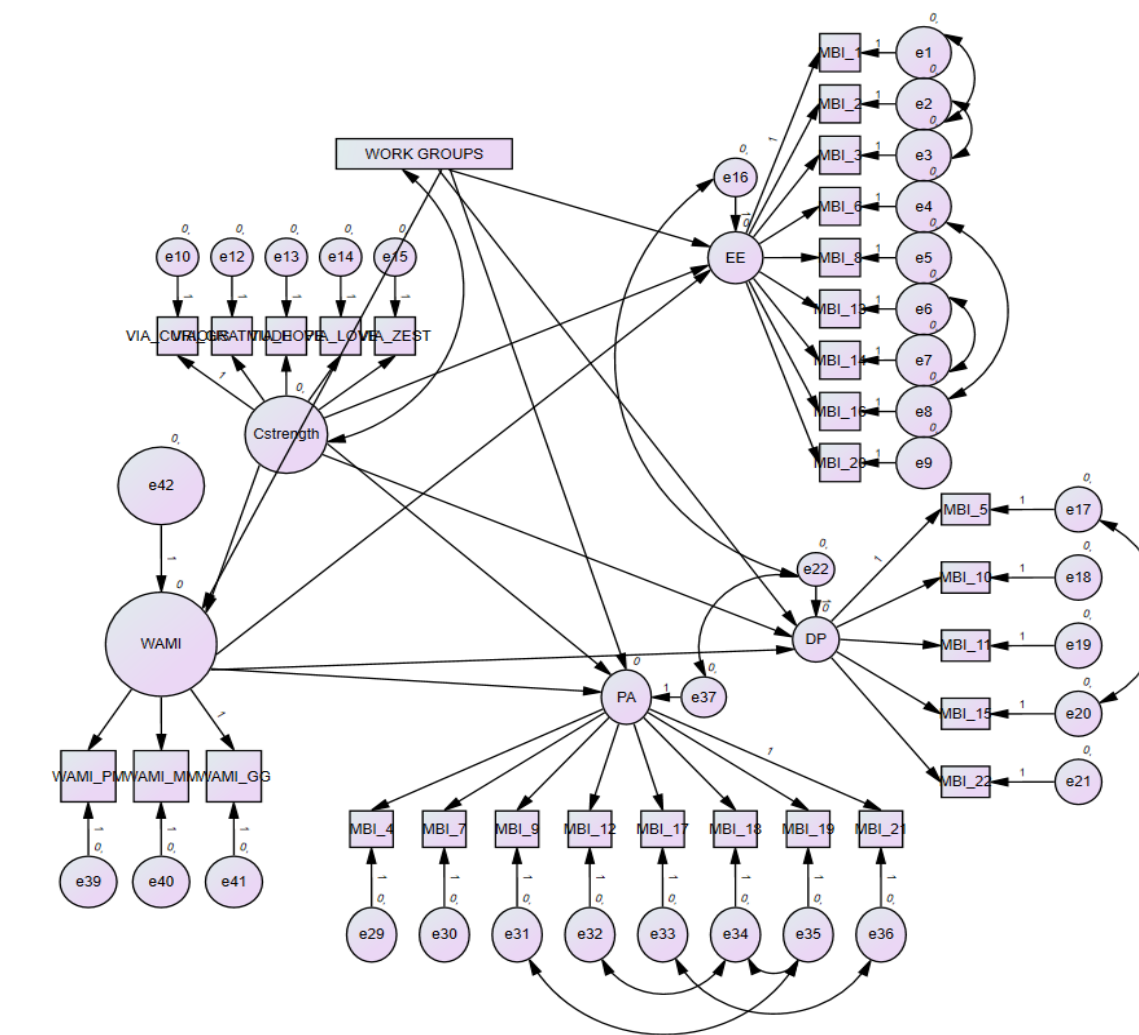


Figure 2

Mediation model for character strengths and work groups predicting meaningful work and burnout.

Post Hoc Model Results

Because the Personal Accomplishment subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach et al., 1997) was the only dependent variable of the mediation model that did not have a statistically significant relationship with all independent variables proposed (see Table 5), I explored the literature to identify further explanation. After examining the literature review from Chapter 2, I identified that a limitation that other researchers have also found of the MBI is the use of the Personal Accomplishment

subscale as the third dimension of burnout (Qiao & Schaufeli, 2011). In fact, through an analysis of convergent validity, Qiao and Schaufeli (2011) published that the personal accomplishment subscale appears to measure a different construct that more closely aligns with engagement, which is a separate and negatively correlated phenomenon to burnout (Trógolo et al., 2020).

The personal accomplishment subscale of the MBI instrument has been widely questioned and is not utilized as a dimension of burnout in the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OBI; Demerouti et al., 2003) or the Burnout Measure (BM; Malach-Pines, 2005). The Burnout Measure (Malach-Pines, 2005) was the instrument utilized in the study conducted by Allan et al. (2019) exploring a similar mediation model; however, this instrument has other significant limitations because it only measures burnout symptoms correlating with the Emotional Exhaustion subscale of the burnout inventory. Since the MBI advises against a global measure of burnout (in which a composite ‘burnout’ score is generated) and measures each dimension of burnout independently, a modified mediation model removing the Personal Accomplishment subscale is justified by precedent in the literature (Alharbi et al., 2020; Maslach et al., 1997; Shirom, 1989).

With new information and data analysis presented to me, I modified the initially proposed model slightly by removing the path between the independent variables and the Personal Accomplishment subscale. The remaining hypothesized paths remained in the model for post-hoc analysis (see Figure 3).

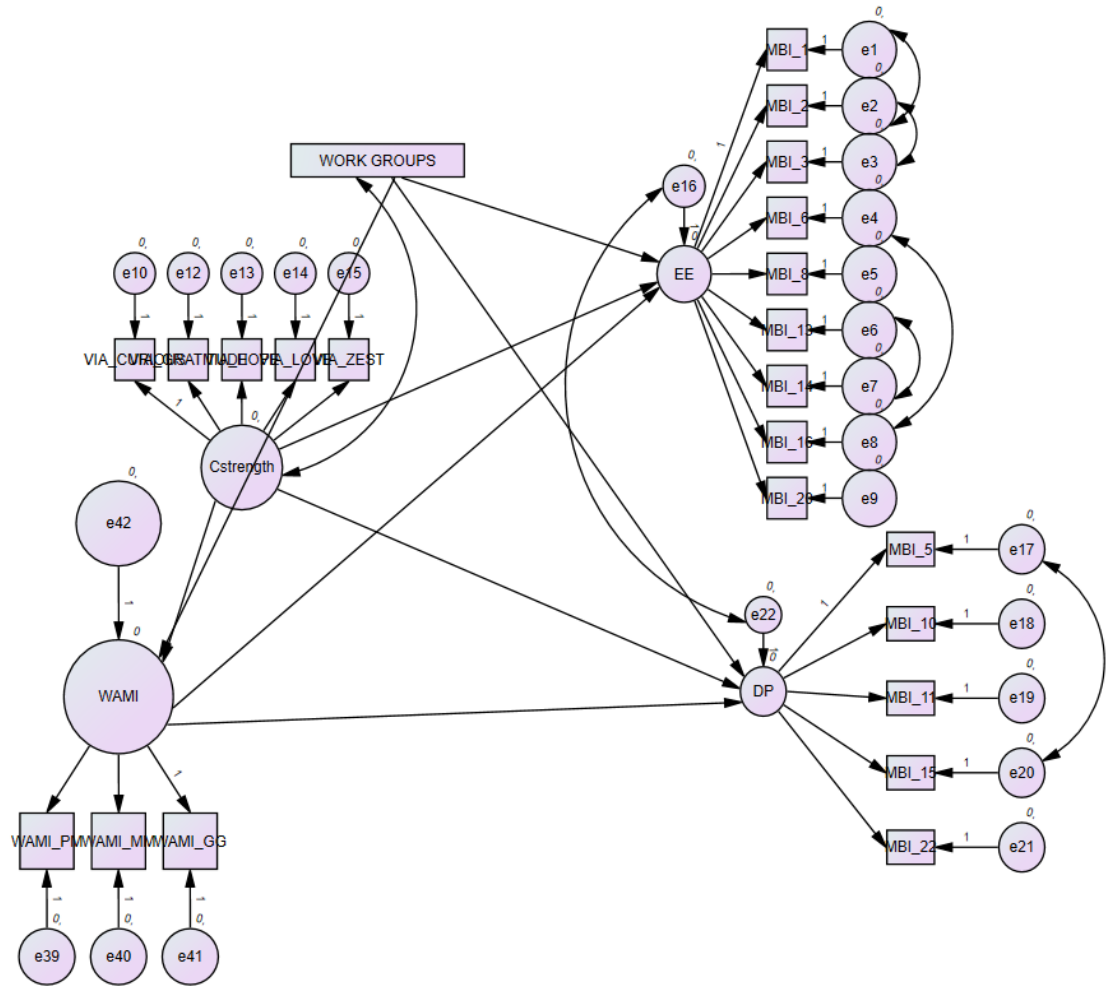


Figure 3

Post-Hoc Mediation model for character strengths and work groups predicting meaningful work, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization.

After this modification, the model fit improved to an acceptable level $\chi^2(216) = 505.96, p < .001$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .058. All path coefficients for the post-hoc model remained statistically significant as identified by the previous mediation model. Path coefficients for indicators loading on latent variables for the modified mediation model can be found

on Table 6 and path coefficients for the hypothesized relations of the modified mediation model can be found on Table 7.

Table 6

Path Coefficients for Indicators Loading on Latent Variables in Modified Model

Path	Unstandardized Estimate	Standardized Estimates	Standard Error	<i>t</i> Statistic
WAMI ^a				
PM ^b	1.82	.95	.11	16.53**
MM ^b	1.11	.73	.08	14.42**
GG ^{bc}	1.00	.73		
EE ^a				
MBI_1 ^{bc}	1.00	.75		
MBI_2 ^b	1.05	.72	.06	19.24**
MBI_3 ^b	1.31	.80	.08	16.23**
MBI_6 ^b	1.02	.66	.08	13.21**
MBI_8 ^b	1.43	.87	.08	17.75**
MBI_13 ^b	1.21	.76	.08	15.43**
MBI_14 ^b	1.17	.67	.09	13.23**
MBI_16 ^b	0.85	.63	.07	12.47**
MBI_20 ^b	1.10	.76	.07	15.43**
DP ^a				
MBI_5 ^{bc}	1.00	.47		
MBI_10 ^b	2.82	.81	.31	9.01**
MBI_11 ^b	3.20	.85	.35	9.11**
MBI_15 ^b	1.23	.51	.15	8.19**
MBI_22 ^b	1.06	.32	.20	5.26**
Character Strengths ^a				
VIA_Curious ^{bc}	1.00	.65		
VIA_Gratitude ^b	1.00	.70	.09	11.67**
VIA_Hope ^b	1.11	.77	.09	12.62**
VIA_Love ^b	0.88	.55	.09	9.62**
VIA_Zest ^b	1.27	.83	.10	13.19**

Note. WAMI = Work as Meaning Inventory; PM = Personal Meaning Subscale; MM = Meaning Making Through Work subscale; GG = Greater Good Motivations subscale; EE = Emotional Exhaustion subscale; DP = Depersonalization subscale; VIA = Values in Action Inventory of Strengths. Indicators are identified by the name of the instrument and the instrument item or the composite score of that subscale (.i.e. VIA_Curious indicates the composition of the curiosity questions of the VIA instrument).

^a Latent Variable. ^b Indicators ^c Factor Loading set to 1.00 to identify the model.

** $p < .001$

Table 7*Path Coefficients for Indicators Depicting Hypothesized Relations in Modified Model*

Path	Unstandardized Estimate	Standardized Estimates	Standard Error	<i>t</i> Statistic
WAMI ^a				
Character Strength	1.27	.45	.18	7.20**
Work Groups	-.41	-.17	.12	-3.45**
EE ^a				
Character Strength	-.48	-.20	.14	-3.53**
Work Groups	.37	.18	.10	3.84**
WAMI	-.34	-.41	.05	-6.70**
DP ^a				
Character Strength	-.17	-.18	.06	-2.75*
Work Groups	.16	.19	.05	3.57**
WAMI	-.13	-.37	.03	-5.18**

Note. WAMI = Work as Meaning Inventory; EE = Emotional Exhaustion subscale; DP = Depersonalization subscale.

^a Latent Variable.

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$

Summary

The following section described the statistical results for three research questions posed in Chapter 1. The first research question was answered by calculating a one-sample *t*-Test to determine which character strengths were significantly higher or lower than the population means. The second research question examined the relationship between 24 character strengths and work environment questions on meaningful work and burnout subscales through the use of a Pearson *r* correlation matrix. Additionally, a MANOVA was used to identify the significant differences between eight work environments in order to distinguish the work groups variable which combined similar work environments for the final model. Finally, the structural equation model was composed of a mediation, partial mediation, and modified mediation model to examine optimal model-fit. The next

section will further discuss these results, the implications for practice, and areas of future research.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This discussion section aims to provide further contextual explanations of the quantitative results detailed in Chapter 4. An existential positive psychology foundation was used to explore the unique character strengths within a counselor population, while also identifying relationships among character strengths, work environments, and meaningful work on dimensions of burnout. The following study contributed to the body of literature introduced by Allan et al. (2019) in three distinct ways. As recommended by Allan et al. (2019), this study added a work environment variable to explore the relationship between work environments, meaningful work, and burnout in counselors. Secondly, an additional sample of counselors contributed to the understanding of character strengths distinctive to the counselor population. Finally, my study took a deeper dive into the construct of burnout by exploring the mediation model through a multidimensional lens of burnout as opposed to a global measure.

Counselor Character Strengths

The first research question employed a one-sample *t*-test to identify the most salient character strengths in a sample of counselors as compared to the population means of American adults (VIA Institute of Character, 2020). I hypothesized that the salient character strengths would be congruent with the findings of Allan et al. (2019) and I was partially correct. In the present study, the counselor sample reported significantly greater usage of the following strengths: *bravery, fairness, gratitude, honesty, judgment, love of learning, perspective, and social intelligence*. Allan et al. (2019) reported similar results with *gratitude, honesty, judgment, love of learning, perspective, and social intelligence*;

however, their sample did not have significant scores in *fairness* or *bravery*. The salient strengths for counselors within both studies is of no surprise because they are also consistent with characteristics referred to as *common factors*: empathy, alliance, congruence, and positive regard, which are necessary for counselors and have been found to contribute significantly towards positive therapeutic outcomes (Norcross, 2005). A possible explanation for the identification of greater *fairness* and *bravery* in the counselor sample of this study as opposed to the Allan et al. (2019) study could be related to the impact of the global pandemic and sociopolitical discord during the time in which the data for this study was collected. *Fairness* and *bravery* refer to the ability to use logic and empathy to consider the perspective of others and the courage to face one's fears, respectively (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The year of data collection was saturated by unexpected change, grief, and conflict. Counselors were called upon to process this fear and uncertainty for themselves while simultaneously holding space for clients to do the same. Given this context, it is understandable that counselors were called on more than before to face their own fears (*bravery*) while objectively exploring the fears of their clients (*fairness*).

The present study also identified that the counselor sample reported significantly lower levels of *self-regulation* and *teamwork* than the average adult population. These findings are congruent with Allan et al. (2019) and validates the proposed hypothesis. The character strength *teamwork* refers to an individual's contribution as a member of a group or team (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Allan et al. (2019) proposed that this may not be endorsed among counselors because they often work with clients individually, as opposed to in a group with other counselors. *Self-regulation* refers to one's ability to

maintain control of their reactions to negative experiences (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This character strength can be exhausted and requires practice to maintain. Interestingly, the finding that *self-regulation* is lower in two counselor samples as compared to a general population of adults warrants recognition (Allan et al., 2019). These findings could be understandable in the context of a counselor's inherent role requirements. A counselor holds space for clients processing negative emotions and experiences. This leads a counselor to be exposed to negative emotions more frequently than the average adult. Greater exposure to negative experiences without the proper tools could contribute to significant depletion of one's ability to regulate self. Furthermore, the counselor sample scored higher than the average population in *honesty*, which refers to genuineness and congruence of self. If a counselor is presenting genuinely in a therapeutic session where negative experiences and emotions are processed, it may be incongruent for a counselor to control their reactions and self-regulate. Despite the importance and significance of counselor *honesty*, the counselor sample reporting significantly less usage of *self-regulation* than the adult population may be a contributing factor to the significant level of burnout experienced within the helping profession (Cimiotti et al., 2012; Morse et al., 2012).

Relationship Between Variables

For the next research question, I hypothesized that the character strengths of specific virtues would have a significant relationship with meaningful work and burnout subscales. Through my correlation matrix, I was able to identify that *curiosity*, *gratitude*, *hope*, *love*, and *zest* held strong relationships with meaningful work and burnout dimensions. My hypothesis was not supported by these results; however, these results

listed all five character strengths that comprise the “happiness strengths” and upheld the hypothesis proposed by Allan et al. (2019) regarding this strength grouping as a significant predictor of meaningful work and burnout. These results are further supported by the works of Littman-Ovadia et al. (2017), who identified that the usage of “happiness strengths” were strongly associated with positive psychological and emotional work-related outcomes. Specifically, the results of this study identified that counselors who exercise the “happiness strengths” also value close relationships (*love*), have a natural desire to explore new ideas (*curiosity*), are optimistic (*hope*), feel thankful towards self and others (*gratitude*), and live life full of energy (*zest*; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Counselors who reported commonly using these strengths also reported greater meaningfulness at work and less symptoms of burnout.

Work Environment

Work environment was a significant contribution to the body of literature surrounding the use of character strengths on meaningful work and burnout (Allan et al., 2019). The work environment variable that explored specific organizational funding sources was found to be correlated with meaningful work and burnout. The variable that measured the location in which counseling occurred (e.g. clinic, field, inpatient) did not display a significant relationship to meaningful work or burnout symptoms. This suggests that characteristics of work environment impacting burnout are more complex than the location in which counseling occurs. Instead, it appears that the demands of the organizational structure hold significant influence in the development of burnout. Specifically, counselors employed at individual private practice, group private practice, and university counseling settings reported greater experiences of meaningful work and

less burnout-related symptoms than counselors employed at community mental health and non-profit organizations. These findings are congruent with researchers who have identified characteristics most commonly found in community mental health organizations (e.g. high caseloads, case complexity) that can contribute to symptoms of burnout (Aarons et al., 2009; Day et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2014). Counselors working in community mental health and non-profit organizations also reported greater symptoms of burnout and significantly less experiences of meaningful work. This further supports the findings of Gaal (2010) who suggested community mental health counselors were at greater risk for burnout than their private practice counterparts and added that they are also at greater risk for not experiencing meaningful work.

A Counselor Burnout Model

The results of the previous two research questions contributed to the overall findings for a model of counselor burnout. From the previous research question, the happiness strengths: *curiosity*, *gratitude*, *hope*, *love*, and *zest* were used in the final model and found to have a positive relationship with meaningful work and a negative relationship with dimensions of burnout. This suggests that counselors who reported utilizing these strengths collectively also reported greater levels of meaningful work, which contributed to a reduced level of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, two symptoms and dimensions of burnout.

Furthermore, the final model identified the significant relationship between work groups and emotional exhaustion or depersonalization as mediated by meaningful work. The positive relationship between work groups on these dimensions of burnout indicated that counselors who reported working in private practice or university-settings were less

likely to report symptoms of burnout, particularly when greater experiences of meaningful work were reported, as opposed to counselors employed at community-based or non-profit organizations.

Removal of Personal Accomplishment from Final Model

Personal accomplishment refers to an individual's feelings of efficacy, so reduced personal accomplishment can be described as a measure of an individual's feelings of failure (Maslach et al., 1997). This dimension of burnout has often been criticized as more closely aligned with the construct of engagement (Qiao & Schaufeli, 2011) and is not used in many other instruments measuring burnout. The personal accomplishment dimension did not present with significant relationships across all variables when the first mediation model's path coefficients were examined. Specifically, personal accomplishment did not have a significant direct or indirect effect on work groups. When the model was examined again without the personal accomplishment dimension, model fit significantly improved to an adequate level. This removal was supported by the multidimensional model of burnout because a global construct was not measured and each dimension could be interpreted independently (Maslach et al., 1997). This suggests that negative self-evaluation of a counselor's worth at work is not a significant predictor of burnout across work groups as mediated by meaningful work. For example, counselors in private practice or community mental health do not have any significant differences in their evaluation of self-worth or efficacy at work. Therefore, personal accomplishment may not be a useful mechanism in measuring burnout across work groups. These findings are important to the advancement of burnout research by echoing other researchers'

concerns regarding the accuracy of personal accomplishment as a dimension of burnout (Maslach et al., 1997; Qiao & Schaufeli, 2011; Shirom, 1989).

Theoretical Implications

The significant relationships identified by the modified mediation model further support the theoretical foundation for this study, existential positive psychology. Existential positive psychology ultimately explores the deeper questions of how an individual can not only survive, but succeed, amidst the daily struggles that are inseparable from the human condition (Wong, 2009). In the context of the present study, I employed the use of character strengths as an individual's response in the face of chronic work-related stress. While finding meaning at work has been linked to a reduction in burnout symptoms, the results of this study identified how character strengths may be used to find meaning in order to reduce burnout. Meaning can be identified within an individual or organization (Steger et al., 2012). With that said, this study found meaningful work to be significantly influential within an individual context, through character strengths, and in an organizational context, through the identified work environments.

When each of the five happiness character strengths that composed the final model were employed simultaneously, they contributed to a greater search for meaning at work. In the face of adversity, counselors may be able to use these strengths to further their search for meaning at work as a tool against emotional depletion or cynicism. For example, *curiosity* can be used by counselors to gain knowledge in how their work impacts others and contributes to the greater good. This greater good, a facet of meaningful work, can foster a sense of *hope* for the future of society and may contribute

to the development of their personal mission, or meaning, at work. Their personal meaning, another facet of meaningful work, supports empathy and their connection with others through *gratitude*. This connection with others may be strengthened by feelings of *love* in close relationships and spark a deeper understanding of how their work contributes to their overall meaning in life. *Zest* is likely the spark that ignites the search for meaning in life and work, which initiates this cycle of self-exploration. Counselors reporting greater usage of these character strengths are more likely to experience meaningful work, which may protect, or quickly resolve, the deleterious effects of burnout.

Despite the view that systematic organizational factors that contribute to burnout are difficult to change, Maslach et al. (2001) acknowledged the significance of examining organizational factors contributing to the perpetuation of burnout. Michaelson (2005) made a strong case for the responsibility of organizational leaders and institutions to help their staff experience meaningful work. The results of this study identified a significant relationship among counselors employed in a private practice or university counseling setting who reported experiencing meaningful work. This relationship contributed to their success in mitigating burnout symptoms. The job demands and organizational characteristics of the work environments listed above appear to positively contribute to a counselor's success in identifying meaningful work. This also indicates that counselors with the greatest risk for burnout, community and non-profit counselors, are struggling to experience meaningful work (Gaal, 2010).

Implications for Practice

The phenomenon of burnout continues to spread rampantly across helping professions, yet limited research has been explored directly in context to the counseling profession. Furthermore, limited research has used an existential positive psychology approach, which considers the utility of character strengths on existential concerns as presented in individual and environmental contexts. Implications of the findings from this study are important for a variety of groups. The following section will explain the potential uses and implications of these results for individual counselors, clinical supervisors and counselor educators, as well as organizational leadership. Implications for organizational leaders are particularly noteworthy because it is clear organizational policies impact burnout and strategies cannot solely focus on individual characteristics.

Individual Counselors

Burnout continues to impact the counseling profession at concerning rates (Morse et al., 2012; Simionato & Simpson, 2018). The findings of this study outlined above offer significant implications in mitigating the risk of burnout and its detrimental effects outlined in Chapter 2. Individual counselors can utilize the following study by reflecting on their own salient character strengths and using these strengths throughout their work and self-care routines. In addition, self-reflection and exploration of character strengths commonly used within and after counseling sessions could support greater personal growth. Counselors might notice that strengths that were commonly used at the beginning of their career have fallen by the wayside and can be practiced once more to further support counselor wellness.

Clinical Supervisors and Counselor Educators

Character strengths are noteworthy indicators of how an individual overcomes adversity and responds to everyday circumstances. Furthermore, these strengths inform the prioritization of one's value system. Counselor educators can use the information from the present study to focus on the development of *curiosity, gratitude, hope, love, and zest*. If exercised regularly from the beginning of their training, counselors could have a stronger capability to employ these strengths in their search for meaningful work as a means of overcoming systematic influences of burnout. Furthermore, self-regulation is an important character strength that may protect against symptoms of burnout; however, it is critical for counselors to be able to regulate their emotional state without losing their presence and authenticity in the counseling session. Self-regulation training could further support the development of healthy boundaries that safeguard counselors against the effects of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

These findings further support the provision of strength-based supervisory strategies (Allan et al., 2019). This approach could facilitate counselor development through the use of individualized salient character strengths. Supervisors may be able to exercise the usage of strengths that have been found to protect against symptoms of burnout. Furthermore, clinical supervisors should be mindful of the significant relationship work environment played in the presentation of burnout and meaningful work. The perception of strong supervisory support within an organization has been found to be a key protective factor against the development of burnout (Edwards et al., 2006; Rzeszutek & Schier, 2014). The vital importance of quality supervisors who are equipped to address burnout through strengths-based supervision is a critical implication

of these findings within practice. Strength-based supervisory practices can be shared across the profession beyond the initial training and development of a counselor. Allan et al. (2019) recommended workshops specifically targeted at educating counselors on the implementation of key strengths in order to alleviate symptoms of burnout by strengthening the identification of meaningful work throughout the profession. Additionally, these workshops could be reinforced through consultation groups that provide counselors an opportunity to practice applying character strengths and receive support through their exploration for meaningful work.

Organizational Leaders

Organizational leaders would benefit significantly from examining the implications of this study on their workforce to improve work satisfaction and reduce turnover. Turnover can negatively impact the quality of client care and cost the organization (Bakker et al., 2005; Salyers et al., 2015). Steger et al. (2012) identified that meaningful work has a significant and positive relationship with workplace satisfaction. Furthermore, meaningful work has been identified as a potential protective factor for employees endorsing burnout (Leunissen et al., 2018). By using the results of this study to emphasize meaningful work through character strengths within an organization, symptoms of burnout may be alleviated rather than increasing rates of turnover.

Since it is clear from this study and many others that community counselors are at greater risk of burnout (Gaal, 2010; Kim, 2015; Lent & Schwartz, 2012) than their private practice counterparts, key differences between work environments should be examined in order to identify the organizational characteristics that contribute to burnout and hinder the exploration of meaningful work. An avenue for exploration may be the

congruence of the organization's stated mission and the expectations of the counselors employed. Organizational leaders must ensure expectations align congruently with their stated values and mission. Expectations that are not congruent with their stated purpose could hinder an individual's search for meaningful work at their organization. For example, if the organization advertises that their mission is to help marginalized clients experiencing mental health concerns, but the standards by which a counselor is measured is profitability, the counselor is being evaluated by a metric driven by an alternate, and often conflicting, purpose.

Day et al. (2017) identified loss of autonomy as a significant risk factor that contributes to burnout. While no research has been found investigating the organizational differences between community mental health and private practice settings, a study of physicians found that those in larger organizational practices reported lower logistical autonomy (Lin, 2014). Autonomy could hinder a counselor from determining the characteristics that are best suited for their usage of salient strengths. Organizational models with universal standards and expectations, without consideration for individual differences, could impair an individual counselor's ability to exercise strengths to employ meaningful work as a protective mediator from burnout symptoms. By highlighting individual differences and finding ways to honor those differences, organizational leaders can support counselors in exercising their personal salient strengths rather than spending those strengths identifying how to fit into a mold. Organizational leaders should utilize the implications of this study to ensure that counselors are given autonomy to meet expectations in a way that fits with their individual strengths.

Limitations

This research study presented had limitations that could influence the generalizability of results across a population of counselors. The following study used cross-sectional data that prevented the study from proposing any causal results. The counselor sample presented with skewed demographics as the majority of the sample consisted of White (72.4%) and female (92.2%) participants. While the character strengths identified in the results were consistent with previous research on the relationship of character strengths and meaningful work (Littman-Ovadia & Niemiec, 2016) researchers should be cautious when interpreting the results as character strengths may present differently across gender (Brdar et al., 2011). Finally, the Values in Action Inventory of Strength (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) does not specifically direct participants to answer the questions within the context of their work environment. The following study assumed that the participants answered questions regarding the usage of their most prominent character strengths as it relates to work, but the VIA-IS does not explicitly instruct participants to answer questions as it relates to work. In order to minimize the risk of this limitation, the VIA-IS was placed at the end of the survey and the participant was primed to answer in the context of work by first answering multiple demographic questions related to their occupation and employment; as well as placing the Maslach Burnout Inventory – Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS; Maslach et al., 1997) and the Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI; Steger et al., 2012) before the VIA-IS. Both WAMI and MBI-HSS explicitly asked questions as they relate to work, which should have improved the likelihood in which questions were answered within the context of work. This adjustment was made in response to the limitations identified by

Allan et al. (2019) in which the demographic questionnaire did not examine characteristics of work environment and the VIA-IS was completed by participants before they completed the instruments that measured meaningful work and burnout.

Directions in Future Research

Future research can expand upon the present study by conducting a longitudinal study across time to examine the development of character strengths throughout a counselor's identity development and examine any causal influence those strengths may have on preventing or reducing symptoms of burnout. Additionally, experimentally designed studies exploring the use of character strengths in supervisory practices could significantly contribute to identifying practical techniques that could address burnout in supervision. Furthermore, the character strength *self-regulation* should be further examined within the counselor population to identify if there is an appropriate degree of self-regulation that can be utilized by counselors to protect against burnout without hindering the authenticity of the therapeutic alliance.

Expanding the differing work characteristics among private practice and community-based organizations could help researchers provide more specific and tangible recommendations to organizational leadership. Specifically, investigating role ambiguity or overload among counselor positions within various work environments could help researchers further understand which aspects of a counselor's responsibilities contribute to burnout. This would support organizational leaders in identifying the job demand that most commonly contributes to the development of burnout, and also support a more targeted approach to uncovering the greater purpose of that specific job demand as it relates to fostering meaningful work. Finally, an empirical examination of systematic

policies and procedures required by community and non-profit mental health organizations could shed light on any organizational expectations that are incongruent with the identified mission and purpose of the mental health organization.

Summary

This chapter provided a discussion of the results identified from the present study. Each research question was answered based on the results from Chapter 4 and implications of these research questions were presented for three potential types of readers: counselors, supervisors, and organizational leaders. The results of the present study tied back to the theoretical framework of existential positive psychology and built upon foundational research conducted by Allan et al. (2019). This study contributed to the greater body of research on burnout and meaningful work through the addition of the work environment variable and the expansion of salient counselor character strengths, as called for by Allan et al. (2019). Limitations and directions for future research were outlined in order to continue supporting advancements in research regarding this topic of study, which is important for supporting overall counselor wellness.

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APPENDIX

Initial Screening

Are you currently working in one of the following counseling-related professions within the United States (*psychology, counseling, marriage and family therapy, social work*)?

* Students in clinical practicum or internship in one of the following disciplines should select **YES**.

☐ YES ☐ NO

IF YES: Please proceed to the demographic questionnaire.

IF NO: Thank you for your time and interest in participating in the following survey. You do not meet the current requirements for participation at this time. You may exit out of the current webpage. Have a nice day!

Demographic Questionnaire

Age: _____ **Ethnicity:** _____ **Sex:** _____

Please select the field of discipline most closely aligned with your graduate degree and/or licensure type. (*Select all that apply*)

☐ Psychology ☐ Counseling ☐ Marriage and Family Therapy
☐ Social Work

Please select your current status of licensure and practice. (*Select only one*)

Independently Practicing Clinician ☐

Supervised Clinician (Post-Graduate) ☐

Practicum Student* ☒

Internship Student** ☐

* Practicum refers to a student practicing counseling within a university training clinic before internship outside of a university setting. This student receives supervision.

**Internship refers to a student who has not yet graduated providing direct care counseling services outside of a university training clinic. This student also receives supervision.

Please enter your licensure title as defined by the regulatory board within the state you are licensed in (if applicable): _____

If you currently do not hold a license, please enter the title of your expected graduate degree: _____

Please enter your total years of experience providing services as a clinician (*two numbers maximum can be entered*):

Please checkbox the work environment that you provide direct care for the majority of your work week. (*Select only one checkbox per list*).

List One: Work Environment:

- ☐ Field-Based (you meet the client in their home, school, or community)
- ☐ Clinic-Based (the client meets you within an established office setting)
- ☐ Inpatient (the client lives within the location that they receive treatment)

List Two: Work Environment Funding Type:

- ☐ Individual Private Practice
- ☐ Group Private Practice
- ☐ Non-Profit/Charitable Organization
- ☐ Local Mental Health Authority/Governmental Organization/Community Mental Health
- ☐ University Counseling Setting
- ☐ Privately-Funded Hospital/Clinic
- ☐ Residential Treatment Facility/Group Home
- ☐ Jail/Prison/Detention Center

VITA

Felicia L. Mirghassemi

EDUCATION

PhD	Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX Counselor Education and Supervision, GPA 4.00 (CACREP accredited program)	2021
M.S.	University of Texas at Tyler, Tyler, TX Clinical Psychology GPA 4.00 Clinical Mental Health Counseling Specialization Neuropsychology Specialization	2015
B.S.	University of Texas at Tyler, Tyler, TX Psychology, GPA 3.98	2013

RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Publications***Journal Articles******Published Peer-Reviewed Articles***

Stocks, E. L., **Mirghassemi, F.**, & Ocejja, L. V. (2018). How is your day going? Reciprocity Norm in Everyday Communication. *International Journal of Psychology*, 53(3), 167-175.

Sass, S. M., Evans, T. C., Xiong, K., **Mirghassemi, F.**, & Tran, H. (2017). Attention training to pleasant stimuli in anxiety. *Biological Psychology*, 122, 80-92.

Book Chapters***Published Book Chapters***

Mirghassemi, F.L., Lundberg-Love, P.K., Sanders, G.D., & Gallien, J.A., (2017). Complex Ramifications of Incestuous Abuse of Adult Survivors: A discussion for helping professionals. In F.L. & M.A. Paludi (Ed.), *Incest: The Ongoing Trauma of Familial Rape*. Santa Barbara: CA Praeger

Mirghassemi, F. L., & Lundberg-Love, P. K. (2016). Psychopharmacology. In E. Stocks (Ed.), *The Gale Researcher: Foundations of Psychology. Volume 5: Physiology and Neuropsychology*. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Publishers.

Mirghassemi, F. L., & Lundberg-Love, P. K. (2016). Elizabeth Warren: The voice of America's future. In M. A. Paludi (Ed.), *Why Congress Needs*

Women: Bringing Sanity to the House and Senate (pp. 73-82). Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO (Praeger).

Mirghassemi, F.L., Scott, K.A., Lundberg-Love, P.K., Phelps, H., & Lyons, A. (2016). Ramifications of Title IX on Campus Sexual Assault Prevention & Treatment Protocol: Will Recent Changes Work to Protect College Students? In M.A. Paludi (Ed.), *Campus Action Against Sexual Assault: Needs, Policies, Procedures and Training Programs*. Santa Barbara: CA: Praeger

Professional Presentations

Mirghassemi, F., Henriksen, R. C., Jr., & Strobe, R. (2021) *The Perception of Burnout in Community Mental Health Counselors*. Presented at The Harris Center for Mental Health Institutional Review Board Closing Report, Houston, TX.

Mirghassemi, F. (2020) *The Big, Bad, B Word: Strategies for Addressing Burnout in Clinical Supervision*. Presented at Texas Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, San Antonio, TX.

Mirghassemi, F. (2020) *The Impact of Gender, Type of Helping Professional, Depersonalization, and Personal Achievement on Predicting Emotional Exhaustion*. Presented at Southwestern Educational Research Association Conference, Arlington, TX.

Mirghassemi, F. (2019). *The Impact of Meaning-Making on Burnout in Helping Professionals*. Presented at National Career Development Association Conference, Houston, TX.

Mirghassemi, F. (2019). *The Impact of Meaning-Making on Burnout in Helping Professionals*. Presented at Texas School Counseling Association Conference, San Antonio, TX.

Mirghassemi, F. (2014). *Sequential Exposure to Victims and Empathy Burnout*. Presented at Southwestern Psychological Association Convention, San Antonio, TX.

Sass, S. M., Evans, T., Xiong, K., & **Mirghassemi, F.** (2014). *Attention training to positive stimuli in anxiety*. Presented at Anxiety and Depression Association of America, Chicago, IL.

Evans, T.C., **Mirghassemi, F.** Tea, R., Sass, S. M. (2014). *Vagal Tone Moderates Attention Bias To Low And Moderately Arousing Threat In Anxiety*. Presented at Anxiety and Depression Association of America, Chicago, IL.

- Sass, S.M., Xiong, K., Evans, T.C., **Mirghassemi, F.L.**, & Johnson, B. (2013). *Discomfort with emotion moderates attentional bias to emotional arousing stimuli in anxiety*. Presented at Southwestern Psychological Association Convention, Fort Worth, TX.
- Mirghassemi, F.L.**, & Stocks, E.L. (2012). *Breaking Conversational Boundaries to Further Develop or Maintain a Relationship*. Presented at the Texas Psychological Association conference, Austin, TX.
- Hopp, B.R., **Mirghassemi, F.L.** (2012). *The Effect of Emotion on Perceptual Processing in Anxiety*. Presented at the East Texas Psi Chi Conference, Tyler, TX.
- Xiong, K., **Mirghassemi, F.L.**, Cochran, J.P., Hopp, B.R., & Sass, S.M. (2012). *The role of emotional cues on attentional processing in depression*. Presented at the Southwestern Psychological Association Convention, Oklahoma City, OK.
- Mirghassemi, F.L.** & Stocks, E.L. (2012). *Conversational Reciprocation among Stranger, Acquaintances and Friends: A preliminary field study*. Presented at the Alpha Chi National Honor Society Conference, Baltimore, MD.

HONORS AND AWARDS

Academic and Research Scholarship Award, <i>Sam Houston State University</i>	2020
Employee Recognition Award, <i>The Harris Center for Mental Health</i>	2019/2020
Commendation of Excellence, <i>The Harris Center for Mental Health</i>	2018
Community Group Counselor Scholarship, <i>American Group Psychotherapy Association</i>	2018
Outstanding Research Award, <i>Psi Chi East Texas Chapter</i>	2014
Alfred H. Nolle Scholarship for Best Original Research, <i>Alpha Chi Honor Society</i>	2012
Stella Crews & Erwin Douglas Dryer Endowed Community Service Scholarship, <i>University of Texas at Tyler</i>	2012

PROFESSIONAL INVOLVEMENT

American Counseling Association (ACA), Member
 Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES), Member
 Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (SACES), Member
 Association for Assessment and Research in Counseling (AARC), Member
 Texas Counseling Association (TCA), Member
 Texas Association of Counselor Educator and Supervisor (TACES), Member
 Psi Chi Honor Society, Member (*East Texas Chapter President 2012-2014*)
 Alpha Chi National Honor Society, Member (*East Texas Chapter Secretary 2011-2013*)