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Running head: BURNOUT IN THE SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKER

Burnout in the School Social Worker:  
Related Individual and Organizational Factors

by

Melissa A. Sutlief, B.S.W.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
University of Saint Thomas / Saint Catherine University  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

### **Abstract**

Having been linked to turnover, absenteeism, a reduction in the quality of services, numerous physical and psychological disorders, and a disruption in interpersonal relations, burnout is a major concern in many human service occupations. This qualitative study sought to identify the factors that either contributed to or prevented burnout in a school social worker. The author of this study analyzed data from a qualitative, semi-structured interview with eight school social workers who have worked in the field ranging from 8 to 33 years. Individual, organizational, and characteristics of the student population were assessed via open-ended questions, which sought to identify factors that might contribute to or prevent burnout in the school social worker. The data was analyzed using inductive, grounded theory methods, in which categories were developed from the interview responses and linked to previous literature. From the data analysis three themes emerged related to ‘Individual Factors’ that either contributed to or prevented burnout. Those themes were: Boundaries, Self-Care, and Attitude. These themes included the concepts of compartmentalization, mental health, and realistic expectations. Three themes also emerged related to ‘Organizational Factors’ that either contributed to or prevented burnout. Those themes were: Supervisory Relationship, School Climate, and Characteristics of Clientele. These themes included the concepts of micromanagement, support, and understanding the role of the school social worker. The findings of this study may inform curriculum development, enhance support structures, and help social workers develop key personal skills that will help them to enhance their resilience, well-being, personal effectiveness, and longevity in the field. The findings also demonstrate how effective supervision and a healthy climate provide a “safety net” for employees, especially when it includes the concepts of boundaries, support, and self-care.

**Keywords:** School Social Work, Burnout, Individual/Organizational Factors, Maslach Burnout Theory, Conservation of Resources, Job-Demands Resources Theory

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Burnout is a frequent topic of discussion and study in the helping disciplines, popular because the feelings of fatigue and disengagement that are descriptive of burnout resonate with many helping professionals. The term *burnout* was first coined by Herbert J. Freudenberger (1974), to mean “to fail, wear out, or become exhausted by making excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources” (p. 159). Burnout develops gradually over time and is the result of excessive demands and limited resources to meet those demands (Tony & Lilian, 2012). Burnout can occur in any job; however, rates of burnout tend to be higher in human service occupations (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Social workers at all levels of practice and in a variety of settings are exposed to a number of factors linked to burnout. Despite the fact that many social workers report considerable satisfaction from their work, they also tend to report higher levels of work-related stress and burnout than many other occupational groups.

A study conducted by Siebert (2005) found that seventy-five percent of the social workers surveyed reported experiencing burnout at some time in their lives. In a study done by National Association for Social Workers (NASW), a participant stated “the major challenge of social work is that social workers have too many things on their plates” (Arrington, 2008, p. 1). In this same study, NASW found that the most common work-related stressors for social workers were: inadequate time to complete their jobs (31%), heavy workloads (25%), salary not comparable to peers in similar professions who conduct similar work (19%), overall inadequate compensation (16%), and challenging clients (16%) (Arrington, 2008, p. 2). While there is an abundance of literature exploring the variables associated with burnout for the helping professional in general, and for social workers in a number of settings, there is a significant lack of research specifically identifying factors which might lead to burnout for the school social worker. This study explored the experiences of

school social workers and how burnout might develop as a result of factors within their organization, individual factors, and characteristics of the student population.

“Comprised of a collection of symptoms; burnout could result in deterioration of functioning on physical, professional, interpersonal, and mental health levels” (Pincus, 1997, p. 1). For the individual social worker providing direct services, fatigue, psychological problems, and sleep disorders were the most commonly reported stress-related concerns, which could be physical indicators of burnout in the professional (Arrington, 2008). At the professional level, the phenomenon of burnout represents a significant problem for effective administration. Among social workers, in general, “prolonged periods of high job stress are linked to turnover, absenteeism, burnout, emotional problems, physical ailments, and even death among workers in general” (Pasupuleti, Allen, Lambert, & Cluse-Tolar, 2009, p. 322). It is likely school social workers experiencing prolonged periods of stress would also experience these same difficulties, although specific studies addressing this concern are not available.

Burnout has serious implications for the mental and physical well-being of social workers, and the work place, as well as clients. First, the provision of care for clients may be compromised. Frequent turnover negatively impacts the quality and continuity of services provided, as does impaired performance at work and absences due to illnesses (Kinman & Grant, 2011). Burnout also has a negative economic impact for employers, as evidenced by a disruption in work, an increase in administrative and training costs, and a decrease in productivity. Butler & Constantine (2005) emphasized the importance of job satisfaction among social workers in general because of its impact on turnover rates, absenteeism, client outcomes, and the recruitment of competent individuals to the field.

In an era of increasing numbers of people in need, rising costs, shrinking budgets, and personnel shortages, it is incumbent upon social work organizations to identify the individual

and organizational factors that may be contributing to burnout in the professional in order to retain and strengthen their most valuable resource, their employees (Pasupuleti et al., 2009). Burnout is often reflected in the development of negative attitudes and feelings of incompetence, a distant and possibly neglectful attitude toward the job, and faulty judgments, which may potentially impair client services (Boyas & Wind, 2010). According to the NASW Code of Ethics (1996), one of the ethical principles of a social worker is *Service*: “the social workers’ primary goal is to help people in need...” (p. 5). Social workers who experience feelings of burnout are likely focused on their own problems, making it difficult to make the client’s needs their priority.

To remain effective, school social workers must be able to combat overload, receive needed support, and work toward balance in their roles. For school social workers’ to meet the challenges of the future, they and their school administrators, at all levels, must be provided with an understanding of specific variables that can interfere with the social worker’s ability to function and what may contribute to the development of burnout. Given that the education of school social workers is both costly and time-consuming, it seems logical that retaining currently employed social work professionals is critical. For this reason, those involved with the education of school social workers should examine the phenomenon of burnout in the school social worker. They should seek to identify the various contributing factors to burnout and encourage future social workers to develop self-care strategies to prevent its likelihood.

In order to guide the development of interventions, enhance the well-being of the school social worker, and reduce the incidence of burnout, it is essential to identify both the risks and practices that may protect them from the negative impacts of the demands that they face. The purpose of this qualitative project is to identify school social workers’ perceptions

of organizational and individual practices that contribute to or prevent burnout in the professional.

### **Literature Review**

Professions that deal with people and professions that have the potential for profound impact on clients tend to be more stressful than other occupations (Pasupuleti et al., 2009). Social work is one such profession. While the majority of social workers demonstrate commitment and effectiveness, they are faced with a number of job-related challenges that are linked with job stress and burnout (Kinman & Grant, 2011).

Burnout is frequently described as a result of non-traumatic but stressful work conditions such as long hours and an overwhelming workload. It is typified by symptoms of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment (Maslach, 2003). Burnout can significantly impact worker morale and effectiveness. “Symptoms of burnout are brought on by the individual attempting to meet excessive demands—stemming from one’s personal expectations and drives” (Pincus, 1997, p.11). It also stems from the “social worker’s professional role, relationships and interactions with others, and environmental factors” (Pincus, p. 11). Environmental factors would include those contributed by the educational system, as well as those within the society.

Curtis, Moriarty, and Netten (2010), in their study of the expected working life of a social worker, found that the longevity of a newly qualified social worker was around eight years—considerably less than those working in similar professions such as doctors and nurses. Barford and Whelton (2010) found “younger employees experience the highest levels of burnout, lasting generally between two to five years in the industry before changing professions”; (p. 272), while employees in the later stages of their careers seemed to be more immune to developing burnout. They also found “...unsupportive supervisors, poor coping

skills, and challenging clients may also add to the elevated burnout levels in beginning social workers” (Barford & Whelton, 2010, p. 275).

Many school social workers are faced with a myriad of challenges in their daily practice that increase their likelihood of burnout. Pincus (1997), in a study of school social workers, noted “...through a shifting of burdens due to economic hardship, changes in family structure, latch-key children, and a lack of parental education, societal problems have fallen to the school bureaucracy, thereby putting greater strain on the school social worker” (p. 7). Societal concerns such as family violence, child abuse, AIDS prevention, sexual abuse, drug addiction and alcoholism in the family, are being recognized as significant. School social workers are frequently being called upon to address these societal problems through intervention and preventative services. Thus, it appears that the school social worker’s tasks “multiply geometrically now, rather than arithmetically, as these societal concerns become more complex (Pincus, 1997, p. 7). Pamperin (1987), in his study of school social workers, stated “...burnout among social workers is a by-product of their role demands, employment characteristics, and the status of social work as a profession” (p. 61). At present, it has been estimated that the ratio of school social workers to students throughout the United States is approximately 1,300 to one (Agrega, 2006). Given these excessive caseloads and time constraints, it is not surprising that school social workers frequently find it challenging to fulfill mandates, pursue new initiatives, or complete certain activities at a professional level.

School social workers provide services not otherwise available to teachers, administrators, parents and children. Their typical role is community liaison, which requires the ability to develop working relationships with various local agencies to secure appropriate resources for children and families. School social workers also have the challenge of balancing the demands and the bureaucracies of the educational systems, as well as their ethical responsibilities to the social work profession and to their clients. Pamperin (1987), in

his study of school social workers and job satisfaction, noted “frustration between the expectations of the professional and the limitations of the organization frequently lead social workers to dissatisfaction with work, emotional strain, and health-related problems” (p. 62). School social workers also suffer from role strain and identity confusion, which are the result of a lack of understanding of the role of school social work among school authorities, students, and parents (Tony & Lilian, 2012). Considering the myriad of challenges in their daily practice, increased demands to address societal issues, and a lack of clarity about their role, it is not surprising that school social workers are at risk for burnout. Finally, Barford and Whelton (2010) found that burnout was predicted by a combination of work environment, personality characteristics, and the absence or presence of social support.

While there appears to be no clear cut cause related to the development of burnout, a plethora of research has shown that individual characteristics, individual practices, and organizational characteristics all play a role in the contribution to or prevention of burnout in the professional social worker.

### **Individual Characteristics**

Among the general public, the conventional wisdom about burnout is that the problem lies within the person. Some people argue that the person who burns out is trying too hard and doing too much, whereas others believe that the weak and incompetent burn out (Maslach, 2003). However, it appears the onset of burnout is a matter of the unique make-up of the employee as well as the challenges found within the profession (Barford & Whelton, 2010). Personality traits play a role in the likelihood of burnout in the school social worker. Early identification of personality traits in the social worker, such as resilience, extraversion, and neuroticism are avenues for further research to determine interventions that might be useful in preventing their potential for burnout.

**Resilience.** In a study conducted by Kinman & Grant (2011), resilience was a particularly pertinent quality for social workers, as it may help them adapt positively to stressful situations and enhance their personal growth. Resilience is defined as “the general capacity for flexible and resourceful adaptation to external and internal stressors” (Kinman & Grant, 2011, p. 262). Resilience, a protective resource, helps individuals bounce back after experiencing significant life changes, deprivation and stress, thus preventing burnout. Kinman and Grant (2011) noted a number of other factors associated with resilience in the professional, which included such factors as “valuing the work role, but setting clear boundaries between work and non-work demands; developing well-structured work routines; effective communication skills and successful peer support mechanisms; and enhancing self-awareness and acceptance by reflecting on personal strengths and limitations” (p. 264). Some aspects of resilience have a strong genetic component; however, the bulk of the research on resilience suggests “environmental factors such as the quality of family and peer relationships and attachment style in childhood are crucial predictors of resilience in later life” (Kinman & Grant, 2011, p. 263). Additionally, an internal locus of control, optimism, social support, and the effective regulation of cognitions and beliefs were particularly pertinent qualities in enhancing resilience to stress (Kinman & Grant, 2011).

**Extraversion.** According to Barford and Whelton (2010) “numerous studies have found links between extraversion and burnout; especially finding it inversely correlated with the emotional exhaustion component” (p. 272). What this suggests is that individuals who are more extraverted would be less likely to experience emotional exhaustion. This would seem reasonable as individuals who are more extraverted tend to have more social connections, possibly expanding their support system.

**Neuroticism.** Neuroticism has also been found to be predictive of burnout. Barford and Whelton (2010) posited “individuals who score highly on the neuroticism scale

experience a higher proportion of intensely negative and distressing emotions and tend to be more emotionally over-reactive and experience difficulty returning to a neutral state after emotionally distressing situations” (p. 273). Additionally, employees who were engaged and interested in their work were far less likely to burn out than exhausted employees who have adopted an attitude of cynicism and disinterest (Barford & Whelton, 2010).

### **Individual Practices**

Participants who have greater difficulty asking for help experienced higher levels of burnout (Siebert, 2005). This finding highlights the notion that social workers’ personal attributes, not just their workplace circumstances or personal histories, can contribute to the development of burnout. Social workers can also benefit by networking and interacting with social work professionals from other facilities. Involvement in professional organizations provides the opportunity to seek and receive support from colleagues who understand the stressors of the job. “The social self can be cared for by engaging in significant interactions with others—for instance, by having dinner with friends, participating in sports events...” (Moore, Perry, Bledsoe, & Robinson, 2011, p. 546). Individuals who have a healthy and supportive partner are better able to deal with emotional stress in an effective manner and are thus less likely to experience burnout (Barford & Whelton, 2010). Social support from colleagues, supervisors, friends, and family serves as an effective buffer between job related stress and the harmful effects of burnout.

**Balance.** Effectively balancing work and personal life also appear to be significant in the prevention of burnout. In a study by Shier and Graham (2011), participants described the need to be mindful of the intersection between their work and their personal life:

A lot of times when you start working professionally, your work almost over takes you, and you forget about what you need to do for yourself. The ideal is to keep them in good balance. Having a good balance of healthy relationships in my work life and outside in my personal life...knowing what is too much to take on and what

is not (p. 39).

Another individual interviewed by Shier and Graham (2011) stated, “I need to take care of all areas of my life in order to be valued at what I do at work” (p. 38).

**Boundaries.** The participants in Shier and Graham’s (2011) study referenced the importance of establishing appropriate boundaries. Social workers must “make sure you do not take your work home with you, and you find outlets that you can use, that work for you, to make sure that does not happen, and so that you can grow personally and professionally in a positive way” (p. 39). Kinman and Grant (2011) highlighted the importance of social workers developing clear boundaries to ensure that healthy empathetic concern did not spill over into empathetic distress, which is evidenced by symptoms of withdrawal and fatigue. Empathetic distress is likely to have negative implications for their practitioners and clients, and potentially lead to burnout.

**Self-Care.** Self-care practices are a vital component of professional growth. Practitioners must be effective in working with all aspects of client health, while ensuring that they are healthy themselves (Bledsoe, et al., 2011). According to Shier and Graham (2011), social workers are exposed to a number of experiences which “...can lead to burnout, but practices undertaken, whether at a professional or personal level can potentially affect those negative experiences” (p. 31). One such practice might include self-care, with elements of physical self-care, social self-care, and spiritual self-care. “With a little ingenuity, social workers can design a multiplicity of ways to make sure that their total self is cared for as proactive measures are taken against burnout, breakdown, and the development of illness” (Bledsoe et al., p. 546). Journaling is useful self-care practice for social workers as a platform for processing situations that arise during their practice and thus, providing a means of expression that accommodates more introverted individuals (Bledsoe et al., 2011). Regular exercise and proper nutrition are identified as frequently preventing the negative

aspects associated with burnout (Bledsoe et al., 2011). Another important aspect of self-care is the social worker's ability to manage personal issues of mental health, which, if left unattended, have a negative impact on colleagues and clients as well as the social worker (Kinman & Grant, 2011).

**Social and emotional intelligence.** Kinman and Grant (2011) considered social and emotional intelligence as potential predictors of stress resilience. Social workers considered to be *socially intelligent* are able to communicate effectively with service users from different backgrounds, as well as forge and maintain effective support networks amongst peers, family and friends. *Emotionally intelligent* social workers are able to “motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations, control impulse and delay gratification, regulate one's mood and keep distress from swamping the ability to think, and empathize and hope” (Kinman & Grant, 2011, p. 264). Kinman and Grant (2011) found “trainees who are more emotionally intelligent, who are more socially competent and empathetic and whose reflective abilities are more developed will be more resilient to stress” and thus less likely to experience burnout (p. 264). Emotional intelligence, which includes enhanced judgment and decision-making abilities, has significant implications for job performance.

### **Organizational Characteristics**

While many researchers believe individual characteristics to be foremost in their predictive value to the burnout construct, it is the characteristics of the organization that are the most influential antecedents to burnout according to other researchers (Barford & Whelton, 2010). Despite the fact that many organizational characteristics have been identified as burnout predictors, it has been “role conflict, role ambiguity, work overload, the quality of interactions between coworkers and supervisors, and employee involvement that have been most consistently associated with burnout” ([Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach et al., 2001], as cited in Barford & Whelton, 2010, p. 273). According to Schwartz, Tiamiyu

and Dwyer (2007), “personal and organizational factors contribute to burnout: the former include inadequacies in a person’s hardiness, assertiveness in dealing with others, and coping skills; the latter include workload, conflict with colleagues and managers, and resource inadequacy” (p. 104).

According to Curtis et al. (2010) frequent tension between philosophy and work demands and the organization of the work environment contribute to stress and burnout in the social worker. Pasupuleti et al. (2009) identified work stressors such as role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload as contributing to the likelihood of burnout in the professional social worker. They found *role ambiguity* occurs when employees face uncertainty or lack of information in carrying out their duties and responsibilities, which in turn causes people to feel discomfort and frustration (Pasupuleti et al., 2009). *Role conflict* occurs when conflicting and contradictory tasks, orders, or directions are given; this in turn places strain on an individual, increasing their likelihood of burnout (Pasupuleti et al., 2009). *Role overload* occurs when asked to do too much work or asked to perform work without necessary resources. Many workers who experience role overload also experience increased frustration at work, which can ultimately lead to burnout (Pasupuleti et al., 2009).

Organizational stressors stemming from the organizational structure, climate and management style have also been found to contribute to the likelihood of burnout in the professional social worker. In fact, O’Donnell and Kirkner (2009) found that a common reason for leaving the social work profession was significant stress and burnout related to supervision issues. The main issues in this area were an unsupportive supervisor, inadequate supervision, and/or conflicts with supervision style. According to O’Donnell and Kirkner (2009), “...workers may need support to recognize and celebrate successes that do not occur in their jobs or to feel that their efforts to help children and families are paying off, that they

are making a difference, and these feelings and beliefs may then counteract the negative effects of burnout” (p. 80).

A critical buffer against job stress and burnout is the organization's ability to provide adequate social support. According to Boyas and Wind (2010), “...employees' perception of support from multiple organizational dimensions, such as trust, social relationships with coworkers and supervisors, organizational commitment, communication, influence, and fairness can shape levels of job stress and burnout” (p. 380). From an employee's perspective, the organization helps meet an employee's need for appreciation, admiration, and attachment (Boyas & Wind, 2010). “Supervisor support includes informational, instrumental, and appraisal support elements; such as, encouragement to employees to put forth their best efforts” (Gray-Stanley & Muramatsu, 2011, p. 1070). Support from coworkers includes “informational, instrumental, and emotional support elements, such as the extent to which coworkers can back each other up with work duties” (Gray-Stanley & Muramatsu, p. 1070). *Informational support* refers to the provision of advice, guidance, suggestions, or useful information to someone. *Instrumental support*, also referred to as tangible support, is the provision of financial assistance, material goods, or services. It encompasses the concrete and direct ways people assist each other. *Emotional support* is the offering of empathy, concern, trust, acceptance, and encouragement.

O'Donnell and Kirkner (2009) posited that management may want to assess for and promote a supportive organizational climate – one that fosters respect for the individual, uses peer support groups, provides opportunities to participate in decision-making, and has flexible hours. When the stress experienced on the job exceeds the individual's ability to cope, the employee is susceptible to burnout (Boyas & Wind, 2010). Individuals' who feel supported and well treated by the organization, even when faced with multiple demands and challenges, are less likely to experience burnout. School social workers are often supervised

by district administration that are not trained to provide profession specific supervision needed by school social workers, and thus lack the supportive supervision needed to address these challenges in the school system.

Pasupuleti et al. (2009) found “occupational stress may interact with the quality of a worker’s home and family life” (p. 322). This may occur when the domains of work and family spill over into one another and cause conflict. Aspects of a time-based conflict might include work schedules, changing shifts, or the need to stay and finish work, whereas, a strain based conflict might encompass aspects of the worker’s attitude, potentially including irritability, combativeness, depression, and withdrawal at home (Pasupuleti et al., 2009). Strain based conflicts might arise because of negative events and stresses in the workplace which follow the employee home. Additional causative factors resulting in staff burnout included:

Excessive caseloads, lack of variety in one’s clients, lack of job security, and the impossibility of doing a good job, continuous direct contact with clients, lack of positive feedback, inadequate resources, excess paperwork, nonproductive meetings, isolation from colleagues, lack of knowledge and skills necessary to perform effectively, and inadequate financial remuneration, staff shortages, and changes in supervisory personnel (Sower-Hoag & Thyer, 1987, p. 113).

In a Swedish study, Engstrom, Eriksson, Janson, & Starrin (2011) discovered organizational practices contributed to burnout including reorganization/staff reductions, serious conflicts or harassment, incompatible expectations, and lack of trust and diminished self-esteem. In fact, “reorganization and/or staff reductions doubled the risk of a burnout diagnosis” (Engstrom et al., 2011, p. 323). Reorganization and staff reductions frequently lead to tension and pressure on the established social relationships in the workplace.

### **Clientele Characteristics**

While not prominent in the literature, the characteristics of the client contribute to burnout in professional social workers. Much of the research on the “effects of chronic

exposure to client problems, illnesses, and violence has found that social workers, as well as members of other helping professions, are prone to frustration and emotional exhaustion—major factors leading to burnout” (Schwartz et al., 2007, p. 104). Sower-Hoag and Thyer (1987) found “the dispositional qualities of the client population are viewed as contributing to staff burn-out—being depressed, resistant, ungrateful, etc., which are quite stressful to the staff member who is constantly exposed to them” (p. 107). Additionally, within the school system, Alvarez and Grayson (2007) posited that student characteristics, such as disruptive behaviors, disrespect, and inattentiveness may contribute to burnout reactions among those working in educational systems.

While organizational factors were prominent predictors of burnout in human service occupation, personality factors, individual practices, demographic characteristics, and social support were clearly fundamental factors when considering an accurate overall picture of burnout and thus warrant further study (Barford & Whelton, 2010). There are no single clear cut predictive factors related to the development of burnout; however, research has shown individual characteristics, individual practices, organizational characteristics, and the characteristics of the clientele all play a role in contributing to or preventing burnout in the school social worker. Newell and MacNeil (2010) found that the single largest risk factor for developing professional burnout is human service work in general. In fact, “...the emotional expectations involved with human service work, such as requirements to either repress or display emotions routinely, as well as the chronic use of empathy, are strongly associated with the experience of professional burnout” (Newell & MacNeil, p. 59).

### **Conceptual Framework**

In order to bring clarity to the present study, it is essential to include an articulation of important conceptual frameworks. A conceptual framework gives the researcher the opportunity to share their perspectives, identify influences from prior researchers, and

articulate the relationships between variables and key factors in the study. A conceptual framework also organizes ideas or concepts in a manner that brings clarity to the research and a clearer understanding for individuals reading the study. Conceptual frameworks help to explain why phenomena occur.

This conceptual framework will articulate three theoretical areas related to the topic of burnout in the school social worker: Maslach Burnout Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory (COR), and the Job Demands-Resources Model of Burnout Development.

### **Maslach Burnout Theory**

For the purposes of this study, I will adopt the most widely cited and researched formulation of burnout, the Maslach Burnout Theory. This three-dimensional model, introduced by Christina Maslach, consists of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach, 2003). In a study by MacNeil and Newel (2010):

*Emotional exhaustion* is a state that occurs when a practitioner's emotional resources become depleted by the chronic needs, demands, and expectations of their clients, supervisors, and organizations. *Depersonalization* (also referred to as cynicism) refers to the negative, cynical, or excessively detached responses to coworkers or clients and their situations. *Reduced sense of personal accomplishment* occurs when social workers feel inadequate when clients do not respond to treatment, despite their efforts to help them" (as cited in Maslach, 2003, p. 59).

Maslach (2003) further contends "this multidimensional model stands in contrast to more typical unidimensional conceptions of stress because it goes beyond the individual stress experience (exhaustion) to encompass the person's response to the job (cynicism) and to him or herself (feelings of inefficiency)" (p. 190). The "*cynicism dimension* represents a basic hallmark of the burnout experience—the negative, callous, or excessively detached response to other people and other aspects of the job" (p. 190). The *exhaustion dimension* represents the basic stress response, which shows a direct connection between workload demands and stress-related health outcomes—such as burnout. The three dimensions of burnout appear to

be related to a number of workplace variables in a variety of ways. In general, “exhaustion and cynicism tend to emerge from the presence of work overload and social conflict, whereas a sense of inefficacy arises more clearly from a lack of resources to get the job done (e.g., lack of critical information, lack of necessary tools, or insufficient time” (Maslach, 2003, p. 190).

As discussed above, the literature suggests that the average number of school social workers per student is one per every 1,300 (Agresta, 2006). Thus, it could be hypothesized that the school social worker might suffer from work overload and insufficient time. Leyba (2009) suggests that “overload can set in when a school social worker has too much to do and not enough time to do it” (p. 219). School social workers are responsible for a multitude of tasks that may, at times, result in overload. For example, as a part of the school social workers’ job, they often participate in multidisciplinary teams, intervene in crisis situations, conduct classroom interventions, and implement response to intervention (RTI) activities. They may also facilitate prevention and youth development activities, which includes advocating or working on policy changes. School social workers also facilitate individual and group counseling, collaborate with community members, consult with parents, teachers, and administrators, and develop and implement measurable goals for students with special needs (Leyba, 2009). In some school districts this problem is compounded when administrators overlook what school social workers have accomplished, focusing only on what they have not been able to do (Leyba, 2009). Given the amount of duties the school social worker is assigned, it is not surprising that many feel exhausted, frustrated, and burned out.

Maslach (2003) found that “exhaustion leads workers to engage in actions to distance themselves emotionally and cognitively from their work demands” (p. 190). In fact, “...individuals’ experiencing a high level of cynicism, tend to withdraw from the job and do

the bare minimum, rather than strive to do the very best” (Maslach, 2003, p. 191). These responses are highly dysfunctional and tend to create negative consequences for both clients and colleagues. It would make sense then, that these changes in the worker might impact their relationships with others at their place of work, creating social conflict—another aspect Maslach (2003) suggests may develop as a result of cynicism and exhaustion. According to Akhtar and Lee (2010), two resource-based models appear to be dominant in burnout studies. These models are the Conservation of Resources and Job Demands-Resources described below.

### **Conservation of Resources Theory**

According to Langballe, Innstrand, Aasland, and Falkum (2011), the relationship between possible burnout risk factors and the burnout process is complex, but can be explained using Hobfoll’s (2001) Conservation of Resources Theory (COR). Halbesleben (2006) found that within the burnout literature, Hobfoll’s COR theory “has emerged as the leading theory for understanding the processes leading to burnout” (p. 1134). The central tenet of this theory states “individuals strive to obtain, retain, protect, and foster those things that they value” (Hobfoll, 2001, p. 341). Skovholt, Grier, and Hanson (2001) stated:

Counselors often choose their work because they perceive it to be of great value. Their work can provide enormous meaning and purpose. It is when counseling seems to have little effect that counselors reach despair because their *raison d’etre* for choosing this work—to make a difference in human life—is threatened (p. 171).

Thus, for the social worker, it would seem that valuing one’s work and believing in its importance might play a critical role in the prevention of burnout.

The COR theory focuses on environment and cognitive factors associated with resources, defined as “objects, personal characteristics, conditions or energies that are valued in their own right or that are valued because they act as a conduit to the achievement and protection of valued resources” (Hobfoll, 2001, p. 339). Using the COR theory, “stress is

defined as a reaction to the environment in which there are perceived threats to one's resources" (Aasland et al., 2010, p. 74). Furthermore, "workload may be perceived as a stressor if it constitutes a threat to one's resources" (Aasland et al., 2010, p. 75).

With Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources theory in mind, the proposed research will identify the resources that affect the school social worker, which may contribute to or prevent burnout. According to Smith and Clark (2011) "these resources could be physical objects, social conditions, personal characteristics or energies" (p. 1951). *Physical objects* might include the social worker's "home, car, or other tangible assets that could prevent stress" (p. 1952). Having a supportive partner, seniority or tenure on the job, and co-worker and supervisor support, are *resource conditions*, which are considered intangible. *Personal characteristics* for the school social worker might include both innate and learned skills, as well as personality traits, such as being extroverted and emotionally intelligent. Finally, *energies* are situations, "such as a position in a social network that facilitates the acquisition of more resources" (Smith & Clark, 2011, p. 1952)

For the school social worker one significant resource may be that of social support. Bakker, Demerouti, and Euwema (2005) posited "social support is probably the most well-known situational variable that has been proposed as a potential buffer against job stress" (p. 171). As discussed earlier, recent literature investigating burnout suggests that social support may be a vital resource and a moderator of stress, as it enhances the individual's ability to cope. There is substantial evidence suggesting that support from colleagues and supervisors may also serve to decrease the effects of professional burnout. "Social support from professional colleagues can include *concrete support*, such as assisting with excessive clerical work or taking on a particularly difficult client, or *emotional support*, such as comfort, insight, comparative feedback, personal feedback, and humor" (Newell & MacNeil, 2010, p. 62). As a resource, "social support is effective because it helps to reinforce the

positive aspects of the self when stressful times have led one to lose sight of them” (Halbesleben, 2006, p. 1135). Hobfoll (1988) argued that “social support can both widen one’s pool of available resources and can replace or reinforce resources that have been lacking” ([Hobfoll, 1988, as cited in Halbesleben, p. 1134).

In Akhtar and Lee’s (2010) study of job burnout they found that “...job stress and burnout occur under one of the following three conditions: (1) when individuals’ resources are threatened with loss, (2) when individuals’ resources are actually lost, or (3) when individuals fail to gain sufficient resources following significant resource investment” (p. 341-342). According to this theory, “individual resources exist in a resource pool” and stress is a reaction to the environment in which there are threats to one’s resources (Aasland et al., 2010, p. 74). Aasland et al. (2010) further stated “individual factors such as personality and temperament may affect one’s resources and play a part in burnout development” (p. 74). Halbesleben (2006) stated “the stress caused by one of the three paths will lead employees to burnout over time” (p. 1134). The reason for this is because work demands use up employee resources at a greater rate than they are replenished. As the demands of the job increase and the resources become less available employees experience a sense of hopelessness, eventually leading to emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and ultimately, burnout.

### **Job Demands-Resources Model**

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model notes that job demands and lack of job resources, linked to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, are key features to burnout according to the Maslach Burnout Theory (Maslach, 2003). According to Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli (2001), the JD-R model proposes that the development of burnout follows two processes. In the first process, “demanding aspects of work (i.e., extreme job demands) lead to constant overtaxing and in the end, to exhaustion” (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 502). In the second process, “a lack of resources complicates the meeting of

job demands, which further leads to withdrawal behavior” (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 502). The long-term consequence of this withdrawal is disengagement from work. Theoretically, one may argue that “the *interaction* between job demands and job resources is most important for the development of burnout; that is, of exhaustion *and* disengagement (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 502). Energy depletion, driven by high demands (e.g. time pressure, emotional demands, cognitive demands, shift work) is associated with exhaustion. Erosion of motivation, driven by lack of job resources (e.g. supervisor support, feedback, control, task variety, and financial rewards) is associated with disengagement (cynicism) and lack of efficacy. As a result, the social worker has a decreased sense of personal accomplishment and ineffective care for their clients.

According to Lizano and Mor Barak (2012) the JD-R model assumes that all occupations have job strain factors that can be categorized as a *job resource* or *job demand*. Demerouti et al. (2001) refer to *job resources* as “those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that may do any of the following: (a) be functional in achieving work goals; (b) reduce job demands at the associated physiological and psychological costs; and/or (c) stimulate personal growth and development” (p. 501). Job resources could include “aspects as diverse as opportunities for utilization, supervisor support, financial rewards, and career opportunities” (Van den Broeck, DeCuyper, De Witte, &, 2010, p. 737). *Job demands*, frequently referred to as “physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of work that require physical and/or psychological effort (cognitive or emotional), are often associated with certain physiological and psychological costs” (Prieto, Soria, Martinez, & Schaufeli, 2008, p. 354). Job demands comprise a variety of job characteristics, including workload and role-ambiguity; which are cited in the literature as factors contributing to burnout in the school social worker. “Prolonged exposure to and

coping with job demands, increasingly wears out employees' personal energies, engendering feelings of exhaustion, which is a key feature in burnout (Van den Broeck et al., 2010).

*Job burnout* is assumed to develop due to high demands and low resources leading to depletion in the individuals' resources and energy (Demerouti et al., 2001).

The Maslach Burnout Theory provides valuable insight into the distinct characteristics of individuals experiencing burnout. Both the Conservation of Resources Theory and the Job Demands-Resources Model provide a rich explanatory conceptual framework for predicting and clarifying the complex relationship between job demands, job resources, and burnout dimensions. To that end, these conceptual frameworks are useful in guiding not only this study, but also future interventions to prevent burnout in the professional school social worker.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

A qualitative research design was used for the purpose of this study to gain a better understanding of the individual and organizational factors which, as suggested in the literature, contribute to or prevent burnout. The researcher chose a qualitative interview due to the exploratory nature of the questions being asked and because "when investigators are interested in understanding the perceptions of participants or learning how participants come to attach certain meanings to phenomena or events, interviewing provides a useful means of access" (Berg & Lune, 2009, p. 115). A qualitative research design was also chosen because a quantitative method does not allow the freedom necessary to explore the richness of participants' subjective experiences (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). Additionally, a qualitative method provided a means of assessing unquantifiable facts, such as participants' perceptions.

### **Sampling Procedure**

The sample for this study was a non-probability convenience sample of school social workers in rural Minnesota school districts. For the purpose of this study, “rural” meant a community population of generally less than 10,000. Professionals targeted for recruitment were licensed school social workers. The social workers were either directly employed by the school district or employed by local educational cooperatives whose primary positions were to provide school social work services within the school setting. School social workers were also required to have a minimum of three years of experience working in the school to be considered eligible to participate in this study. Potential participants were invited to participate in the study via email and phone using email addresses and phone numbers obtained from local school district websites. (See Appendix C for a sample of email correspondence).

### **Protection for Human Subjects**

A consent form was given to and reviewed with potential participants prior to beginning the interviews. This consent form was based on a template from University of St. Thomas/College of St. Catherine (See Appendix A). This form included information about the current study and was approved by Dr. Karen Carlson, research chair, as well as the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of St. Thomas, prior to being used in the study. In compliance with the University of St. Thomas (UST) IRB Protection of Human Subjects guidelines, the consent form included an explanation of intent of the study, procedures for gathering and reviewing the data, risks and benefits of the study, confidentiality and anonymity, voluntary nature of the study, and the researcher’s contact information. Following the discussion of the consent form, participants were given an opportunity to ask questions and share any concerns they have about participating in the research project. Participants were asked to be honest in their responses as this would yield

the most relevant data. The participants were given a copy of the consent form to sign. By signing the consent form, the participants acknowledged their understanding of the study and their agreement to participate. Once permission was obtained, the participants were contacted via email or phone to establish dates and times for the interviews. To protect subjects' rights to confidentiality, the participant's names were omitted from the field notes, transcripts, and the final report. All recorded interviews and transcripts were stored on a password protected computer and destroyed at the end of Spring Semester 2012-2013. These procedures were also reviewed and approved by Dr. Carlson and the University of St. Thomas (UST) IRB.

### **Data Collection Instrument and Process**

A semi-standardized interview was used to collect information for the study. This semi-standardized interview involved the implementation of a number of predetermined questions which were "asked of each interviewee in a systematic and consistent order, but the interviewers were allowed the freedom to digress; that is, the interviewers were permitted (in fact, expected) to probe far beyond the answers to their prepared standardized questions" (Berg & Lune, 2009, p. 112). Additionally, the semi-standardized interview allowed the researcher to skip questions if the participant had already answered them earlier in the interview, giving the researcher the flexibility to encourage elaboration on answers if their meanings were unclear (Berg & Lune, 2009).

The semi-standardized interview used for this study had two sections. The first section was composed of four demographic questions regarding the participant's gender and age, educational background or licensure, and number of years working in the school setting. The remaining fifteen questions were open-ended qualitative questions (See Appendix B). The research questions were guided by the overall research question, and supported by literature related to burnout in the human services field, with particular attention to professional social workers. Sequencing for questions in the interview schedule began with a

few nonthreatening (demographic) questions, which allowed the interviewer and the participant to develop a degree of rapport before more serious and important questions were asked (Berg & Lune, 2009).

From there, the questions began to get a bit more in depth, asking about the participant's longevity in the field and their thoughts about what has contributed to that longevity. Specific questions were posed about individual and organizational practices which may contribute to or prevent the likelihood of burnout in the school social worker. Questions were asked about characteristics of the student population which may contribute to or prevent the likelihood of burnout. The participants were asked to share their thoughts about resilience and self-care and the role they might play in the prevention of burnout for the school social worker.

Finally, the interview concluded by asking the participants their thoughts about what the profession could do to prepare social workers to cope with issues of burnout. Throughout the interview follow up questions, such as "Could you tell me more about that?" were incorporated, which provided the interviewer with a way to "draw out more complete stories from subject and elicit more information about whatever the respondent has already said in response to a question" (Berg & Lune, 2009, p. 121).

The interview questions were reviewed by committee members and a fellow researcher to avoid leading questions. Prior to the interviews, the interview schedule was emailed and approved by Karen Carlson, Clinical Research Chair, and submitted as part of the IRB application process. This ensured that the eighteen questions met with UST IRB and Protection of Human Subjects guidelines. The interview questions were checked to ensure that they were not too personal in nature, were related to the research question, and were open-ended. A pilot test was done with a research partner of the interview schedule to increase the validity and the reliability the interview. The interviews, carried out in a semi-

structured and relaxed format, lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and were recorded via an iPad. While the researcher offered to meet participants at an agreed upon location, all of the participants requested to do the interview over the phone.

### **Data Analysis Technique**

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim from the individual audio-tapes and coded for content analysis. These transcriptions were manually analyzed by the researcher using a grounded theory approach for qualitative analysis. *Content analysis* is “a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings” (Berg & Lune, 2009, p. 349). Through content analysis, it is expected that themes will emerge from this data. *Open coding* was used to find patterns within individual interviews. The researcher examined the data line by line to identify repetitious words, ideas, and concepts. The data was reread numerous times by the researcher and the concepts, or codes, that emerged were written in the margins. After the initial coding session, the researcher reviewed the codes and applied a systematic label to the codes to create themes. As these themes emerged, the researcher noted them in the margins of the transcript.

### **Findings**

The following section is broken down into demographics, participants’ understanding of burnout, and overall findings. The demographic characteristics of the participants interviewed were described, noting the gender, age of the participants, years of experience in school social work, and educational background. Then, for the purpose of clarity, a description of the participants’ understanding of burnout is given, including quotes from participants to articulate their thoughts. Finally, an overall analysis of the major findings was discussed, which included participant’s perceptions of individual and organizational factors which might contribute to or prevent burnout in the school social worker.

### Demographics

Eight licensed school social workers working in rural Minnesota public schools were interviewed for this qualitative research project to obtain data regarding their perceptions of both individual and organizational practices that might affect the likelihood of burnout in the school social worker. The school social workers who participated in this study were between the ages of 35 and 60 years old, with the mean age being 46. Of the participants, the majority (62.5 percent) were female compared to only 37.5 percent male. The average number of years of experience was 17.5, ranging from 8 to 33 years. Of the eight school social workers, five were Licensed Social Worker's, while the remaining three held Masters of Social Work degrees. All of the social workers who participated in the study reported that they were the only school social worker in their school. The following table illustrates the demographics of the participants (See Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Demographics of Participants Interviewed*

	Age	Gender	Licensure	Years of Experience
1	35	F	MSW	8
2	35	M	MSW	9
3	36	F	LSW	15
4	45	F	LSW	12
5	51	F	LSW	22
6	51	M	LSW	21
7	59	M	MSW	33
8	60	F	LSW	20

### **Clarification of Burnout**

Participants were asked to describe what ‘burnout’ meant to them and what it looks like when someone is burned out. The following quotes articulate those thoughts:

*The basic consensus for me is ‘lack of energy or enthusiasm’ for the populations or the issues you are being asked to serve—lack of empathy and a loss of focus of what you are there for.*

*Well, in my opinion, burnout means that you are at the point of having an emotional breakdown and you are thinking negatively all the time—just cynical and very negative.*

*I think you can tell a person who is stuck in a rut of doing the same thing every day, doesn’t have any new ideas or enthusiasm or energy—just focused on getting through the day—putting in their time.*

*Someone who no longer has anything to give.*

*I notice very cynical and jaded—a big drop off in efficiency and output, so you cover and pick up the slack for somebody, as you think...are they about ready to retire?*

*Overall negative attitude—dismissing feelings of students and colleagues.*

*Feelings of ‘I just can’t do this—I can’t take on one more thing’.*

These participants responses fall in line with the most widely acknowledged characteristics that formulate the definition of burnout, the Maslach Burnout Theory. As the literature suggested, burnout consists of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach, 2003).

### **Individual Factors Related to Burnout**

From the data analysis three themes emerged related to ‘Individual Factors’ that contribute to or prevent the likelihood of burnout in the school social worker: boundaries, self-care, and attitude (See Table 2). Participants’ comments about the contributing factors will be described first, followed by participants’ comments about the protective factors.

**Table 2**

*A Matrix Display of Individual Themes Related to Burnout in the School Social Worker*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Contributing Factors</b>	<b>Protective Factors</b>
<b>Boundaries</b>	Ability to Compartmentalize Clear Relational Boundaries Saying No	Inability to Compartmentalize Over-investment Inability to Say No
<b>Self-Care</b>	Unaware of own Mental Health Physical Health Unrealistic Expectations	Attentive to Mental Health Physical Health Realistic Expectations Hobbies
<b>Attitude</b>	Negativity/Apathetic Lack a Sense of Humor	Positive Outlook Good Sense of Humor

**Boundaries (Contributing Factors).** The first theme identified through the analysis of the interview data as an individual factor contributing to the likelihood of burnout in the school social worker was boundaries. Contributing factors included in this theme were: compartmentalization, relational boundaries, and the capacity to say no.

**Compartmentalization.** The participants noted that social workers who are unable to compartmentalize, which means their ability to keep their home and work life separate, are at an increased risk for burnout. The following quotes articulate the participant’s thoughts regarding compartmentalizing, as it relates to boundaries:

*You have to be able to detach yourself, you know, really concerned and care for the kid, but it’s not your problem, you can’t take it home.*

*The ability to kind of detach—it’s kind of like drawing the lines between being able to leave work at work—it’s absolutely key.*

*Being able to leave the work at work at the end of the day—I have always tried to keep real solid boundaries—and it helps that I don’t work in the town that I live in—it helps to have that drive at the end of the day.*

**Relational boundaries.** This theme also included the individual's difficulty in establishing and maintaining relational boundaries with their clients. The following quotes articulate the participants' thoughts regarding relational boundaries as it relates to boundaries:

*With kids, we need to have the boundaries—see when we are falling victim to not having good boundaries, where you limit what the client is able to do for themselves—which continues to keep them helpless and defeats our purpose.*

*I would say someone who internalizes everything or is the 'bleeding heart'—where the social worker relates way too much—like empathy on steroids—they don't have good personal boundaries.*

*I think a real important thing is to be able to get along with kids, but not be their friend or buddy...kids need to learn they are safe and they want to know what the boundaries are.*

**Saying no.** The last factor related to this theme was the participant's perceptions of the school social worker being able to establish professional boundaries which would allow them to say no when they felt that they couldn't take on another task or when the demands were unreasonable. The following quotes articulate the participants' thoughts about saying no, as it relates to boundaries:

*To also speak assertively about how it impacts you, the quality of what you do when you are taking on too much*

*If I start to get burnt out it's because I have been taking stuff on that I don't want to.*

*You need to have boundaries to 'say no', like with mandated reporting—the teacher was hinting to me to being the one to report it and it's like, well, you know, the kids said this to you, so you legally need to be the one who reports.*

The above quotes identified by six of the eight participants, speaks to the importance of establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries. It also illustrates how difficulties with boundaries can lead to burnout. Difficulties with compartmentalization, relational boundaries, and saying no may result in school social workers' taking on more than they could handle, taking their work home with them, and having relationships with clients that are not necessary healthy or productive. These difficulties were seen as impacting their work and their relationships with their family.

**Self-Care (Contributing Factor).** The second theme identified through the analysis of the interview data as an individual factor contributing to the likelihood of burnout in the school social worker was self-care. This theme included the social worker's difficulty in caring for their mental and physical health, as well as having unrealistic expectations for themselves.

***Mental health.*** The following quotes articulate the participants' thoughts regarding the social workers' difficulty in addressing mental health, as it relates to self-care:

*Deal with your own personal things, I don't care who you are, everyone has them, whether they are really little and minor or huge historical stuff that you have gone through—it's all about self-care—'healer heal thyself'*

*The ability to take care of yourself first so that you can give.*

*I have always been worried about some social workers because I feel like they are going into social work with a whole lot of their own baggage that has never really been addressed.*

*If someone is prone to some severe mental health, they are in trouble to begin with...all of a sudden they will get too anxious or too personal.*

***Physical health.*** The following quotes illustrate the participants' thoughts regarding physical health, as it relates to self-care:

*You know...if the social worker isn't taking the time to get plenty of rest or eat right—like I take 10 minutes to eat lunch—that's probably not healthy.*

*It shows up in your work when you are trying to burn the candle at both ends.*

**Realistic expectations.** The following quotes illustrate the participants' thoughts regarding realistic expectations, as it relates to self-care:

*Honestly, about a week or so ago I was ready to go to my principal and say 'I can't take on anymore new referrals or anything—I don't know where I am going to fit them in—I already take a 10 minute lunch—but then, I am like 'No', I am not a complainer.*

*We feel like we can take it all on use, but yeah, we cannot over commit—cuz' then we just don't do anything well.*

*I don't always ask for the support—it's a control thing—I really didn't want some stranger to come in and work with the kids, so I did it myself.*

*I remember when I first started, just thinking that I could change the world—not being realistic about how much control I had over certain situations.*

The previous quotes illustrate all of the participants' thoughts regarding the difficulty that some school social workers have when attempting to meet the demands of the job. School social workers, as well as many other helping professionals frequently neglect to address their own issues or even their own physical needs, often setting unrealistic expectations for themselves, resulting in burnout.

**Attitude (Contributing Factor).** Attitude was the third individual theme identified through the analysis of the interview data as an individual factor contributing to the likelihood of burnout in the school social worker. The participants noted that social workers who are negative or who don't have a sense of humor might likely experience burnout.

**Negativity.** The following quotes articulate participants' thought regarding negativity, as it relates to attitude:

*Negativism and not really taking responsibility for anything—blaming others for problems or issues that come up.*

*People who are always looking at the problem, but not looking toward the solution for the problem.*

**Sense of humor.** The following quotes articulate participants' thought regarding sense of humor, as it relates to attitude:

*I have a hard time with staff who are just serious as can be, never smile, never joke, never humor—how can they have an enlightened life, humor is important.*

*You have to be able to not take things too personally*

Of the eight participants', five identified this theme as important. In reviewing their responses, it was evident that attitude was a theme that might contribute to burnout. Participants' noted that individuals, who lack a sense of humor, take things too personally, or focus only on the negative might be at risk for experiencing burnout.

**Boundaries (Protective Factor).** The first theme identified from the data analysis as a protective factor that might prevent burnout was the individual's establishment of boundaries. This theme includes the individual's ability to compartmentalize, develop appropriate relational boundaries, set limits around time-management, and saying no.

**Compartmentalization.** The following quotes articulate the participants' thoughts about compartmentalization, as it relates to boundaries:

*It helps that I have a 45 minute drive—On my way home I unwind from the day and plan for what I have at home—On my way to work, I plan for what I need to do when I get there.*

*When I am gone, I put 100% into that—relaxing, rejuvenating.*

*It is valuable to be away...do what you can when you are there, set up support systems in case of emergencies, and then you have done your part for the day—then get rejuvenated for the next day, because it is going to be there.*

*It's funny—the first thing I do when I get home is change out of my work clothes—leaving that day behind, and wear routine stuff that I only wear at home.*

*I think detachment—in my perspective that this is my job, not my life—this is my specialty area, not my life.*

**Relational boundaries.** The following quote articulates the participant's thought about relational boundaries, as it relates to boundaries:

*It really circles back to good boundaries—it's being able to share the situation with the student but not be enmeshed with it—to kind of keep that viewpoint.*

*You have to be able to empathize with people, without feeling like you have to solve or fix everything and everyone.*

**Saying no.** The following quotes articulate the participants' thoughts about saying no, as it relates to boundaries:

*I have to be able to say no...helping people it is so hard to say no...until you have been emotionally exhausted, mistreated, exposed, of taken advantage of.*

*You have to be able to speak assertively about what you do and quality of what you do when you are taking on too much—in my mind it is about 'How do I get them to realize they have control and what can they do to deal with it'?*

Of the eight participants', six identified this theme as critical in the prevention of burnout. This theme illustrates the importance of establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries. The participants stated that school social workers must be mindful of setting boundaries for themselves, including separating work and home environments in order to avoid compassion fatigue and burnout. Furthermore, the school social worker must be

comfortable setting boundaries in the relationship with students, as well as within the job itself, by saying no when necessary.

**Self-Care (Protective Factor).** The second theme identified from the data analysis as a protective factor that might prevent burnout was the individual's use of self-care. This theme included the individual's ability to recognize and treat their own mental health issues. It also included the individual's ability to access their support systems, care for their physical health, have realistic expectations, and participate in a hobby.

**Mental health.** The following quotes illustrate participants' thoughts on the individual's mental health, as it relates to self-care:

*Deal with your own personal things, I don't care who you are, everyone has them, whether they are really little and minor or huge historical stuff that you have gone through—'healer heal thyself'.*

*Getting that support person, you know, whether it's a professional therapist or a couple of good friend—you just really have to have that support person.*

*Hopefully, we social workers are more self-aware enough to kind of pull back and take care of ourselves.*

**Physical health.** The following quotes illustrate the participants' thought around physical health, as it relates to self-care:

*I just remember looking forward to Wally-Ball...it was not just exercise, it was fun  
Oh, I just think drinking lots of water, exercising, eating healthy and getting lots of sleep.*

*Go for a walk, go for a run, and get the energy out!*

*I can see if I hadn't taken care of myself and even started exercising and those kinds of things that I easily could have gotten burnt out because it was very stressful.*

**Realistic expectations.** The following quotes articulate the participants' thoughts regarding having realistic expectations, as it relates to self-care:

*Change is going to take time, whether it is with students, parents, school environment, it's going to take time and just have that patience and understanding of that.*

*I remind myself that if I do something that isn't effective or maybe impacted a child in a way that wasn't helpful or isn't working...I will always have another chance...and I forgive myself.*

*It's important to remember that we can't be everything to everybody.*

*If you know that you are doing all that you can do, then you can walk away feeling okay.*

**Hobbies.** The following quotes articulate the participants' thoughts regarding hobbies, as it relates to self-care:

*I think having interests outside of work that you really care about and enjoy, because that can help you disengage from some of the stress of the work*

*I make a point of socializing with those outside of the job—I try not to make people I work with my complete circle of friends—just to be engaged with the outside world.*

*I think you need to have a life outside of work, a hobby—mine is reading, it's a ritual before I go to bed, nothing related to work, its pleasure reading.*

*To take care of yourself you should have a positive hobby or passion for something that you can just totally lose yourself in.*

As noted by the previous quotes, this theme illustrates the importance of self-care for the prevention of burnout. All eight participants identified this theme as important. They stressed the importance of social workers being attentive to their own physical and mental health needs in order to work effectively with their work with clients. This included being attentive to their physical healthy; which included eating healthy, getting plenty of rest,

exercising, and seeking out mental health services when necessary. Other avenues for self-care included having realistic expectations for themselves and their role as a school social worker and having hobbies or opportunities for socialization.

**Attitude (Protective Factor).** The third theme identified from the data analysis as a protective factor that might prevent burnout in the school social worker was the individual's attitude. This theme included the individual's ability to keep a positive outlook and use humor to prevent the likelihood of burnout.

**Positive outlook.** The following quotes articulate participants' thoughts regarding having a positive outlook, as it relates to attitude:

*I think it's important to keep a positive outlook about people and situations.*

*Knowing that there is always something that can be done to help the situation, I don't care what the situation is—it may not always work, but I can try.*

**Sense of humor.** The following quote articulates participants' thoughts regarding the importance of having a sense of humor, as it relates to attitude:

*You have to have the ability to laugh at yourself*

Of the eight participants' five identified attitude as an important theme for the prevention of burnout. In reviewing the above quotes, this theme spoke to the importance of the individual's ability to maintain a positive attitude and a sense of humor as critical in preventing the likelihood of burnout in the school social worker.

### **Organizational Factors Related to Burnout**

From the data analysis, the following were identified as themes related to organizational factors which might contribute to or prevent the likelihood of burnout in the school social worker: Administrative Relationship, School Climate, and Characteristics of the Clientele (See Table 3). Explanations of the contributing factors will be described first, followed by explanations of the protective factors.

**Table 3**

*A Matrix Display of Organizational Themes Related to Burnout in the School Social Worker*

Themes	Contributing Factors	Protective Factors
<b>Administrative Relationship</b>	Micromanagement	Cooperative Management Style
	Unrealistic Expectations	Support
	Unclear Role of Social Worker	Clear Role of Social Worker
<b>Organizational Climate</b>	Lack of Support	Supportive Colleagues
	Isolation	Open Communication
	Negativity	Positive Outlook
<b>Characteristics of Clientele</b>	Lack of Variety	Variety of Clientele
	Behavioral Issues	Successes
	Attitude	Attitude

**Administrative Relationship (Contributing Factor).** Administrative relationship was the first theme identified from the data analysis as an organizational factor that may contribute to the likelihood of burnout in the school social worker. Factors included in this theme were: micromanagement, unrealistic expectations, and understanding the role of the school social worker.

**Micromanagement.** The following quotes illustrate participants’ thoughts regarding micromanagement, as it relates to the administrative relationship:

*The more administration wants to intervene, the more they come down and want to tell me how to do my job, the more likely I am to feel exasperated...*

*When the school, instead of asking me for my expertise or asking, “What should we do here?”—just wants it done a certain way—they don’t welcome my input.*

**Unrealistic expectations.** The following quotes illustrate participants’ thoughts regarding unrealistic expectations as it relates to the administrative relationship:

*From a rural perspective, you're expected to do it all—there is a lack of understanding of how much we expect from our staff—asking them to do more, teach more, be more involved.*

*There is not enough staff to manage the extreme amount of needs so you are just trying to avoid a catastrophe—slap a Band-Aid on it and hope it doesn't get ripped off in two seconds.*

**Role of the school social worker.** The following quotes illustrate the participants' thoughts regarding a lack of understanding of the role of the school social worker, as it relates to the administrative relationship:

*Administrators that don't see social workers as a very integral or important part of what's going on...it takes away from what you are doing.*

*I have had some professionals, administrative people, who don't really seem to understand what you do...like, 'what are you doing?' and 'what is the relevance of it?'*

*I think the lack of understanding of the skill set we bring.*

*Our training is definitely different than teachers or counselors, and it's different than a psychologist or support services...constantly fighting to educate...not being legitimized as a professional...that wears me down more than anything.*

Of the eight participants', five identified this theme as a critical factor contributing to burnout. The above quotes illustrate how when the relationship with administration is one of fear and misunderstanding, burnout is likely to occur. School social workers often feel as though their role is not understood or valued by their administrators and their expectations are unrealistic.

**Organizational Climate (Contributing Factor).** Organizational climate was the second theme identified from the data analysis as an organizational factor that may contribute

to burnout in the school social worker. Participants noted that when the climate of the school is isolating, unsupportive or negative, that burnout is likely to occur.

**Support.** The following quotes illustrate the participants' thoughts regarding support, as it relates to the organizational climate:

*There is just no support...for instance, with administration—I saw that, cutting positions because of lack of money, or even lack of money to buy resources of any kind.*

*Administration and at times, other teachers, who are ungrateful, taking shots at me if I don't see their kid enough.*

**Isolation.** The following quotes illustrate the participants' thoughts regarding isolation, as it relates to the organizational climate:

*Meaning that if you need direction or if a situation is really to a point where you need to have administrator become aware that you feel that you can go to them.*

*Really there is just that lack of professional colleagues to bounce ideas off of.*

*When you are the only one of that particular position, you don't have other people in that position who do the exact same thing as you to collaborate with.*

**Negativity.** The following quotes illustrate the participants' thoughts regarding negativity, as it relates to the organizational climate:

*Negativity, you know...people just putting their time in and not really doing anything different or new—just real cynical about whether or not students were gonna change.*

*People who always look at the problems, but not the solution for the problems.*

*They are always finding more negative things to say about the system and/or the kids.*

*It just takes one or two people to be negative and it spreads like wildfire—it can change the most positive person's outlook to be negative.*

*You come up with an idea and they come up with fifty reasons why it won't work.*

The above quotes identified by six of the participants, speaks impact of an organizational climate which is unsupportive, isolating, and negative. Within this theme, participants' noted that as school social workers, they are often the only social worker in their building, which can create feelings of isolation, increasing the likelihood of burnout. They also spoke to the fact that individual negativity is often contagious, resulting in an overall climate of negativity.

**Characteristics of the Clientele (Contributing Factor).** The last theme identified from the data analysis as an organizational factor that may contribute to the likelihood of burnout in the school social worker is the characteristics of the clientele. This theme includes factors related to variety or diversity of the client and client behaviors.

**Variety.** The following quotes articulate the participants' thoughts about variety, as characteristics of the clientele:

*With the EBD (Emotional/Behavioral Disorders), it's just so repetitive at times, where I wish I could just have a tape recorder and just play back what I said yesterday.*

*Also just having the same things over and over—and it just doesn't get any better.*

*Someone whose sole responsibility is to work with the high needs EBD and that's the only population they got to work with—they would get skewed vision—you'd start to think that's the way all kids are.*

*Working with kids with high behavioral needs—where progress is slower paced over a longer periods of time, harder to see the gains and it's just right in front of you all the time.*

**Student behaviors.** The following quotes articulate the participants' thoughts about student behaviors, as characteristics of the clientele:

*Passive aggressive is the most difficult—engaging somebody who doesn't want to be engaged—especially when it is supported by the parent.*

*The extremes for students...the suicidal ideation, the yelling, the blaming—constantly not being able to fill a need—it's like a black hole.*

This was not the strongest theme; however, enough participants' commented on or alluded to characteristics of clientele (i.e., at least three), so it was included as a theme contributing to burnout. Participants' noted that working with behaviorally difficult or unengaged students on a regular basis would increase the likelihood of burnout for the school social worker.

**Administrative Relationship (Protective Factor).** The first theme identified from the data analysis as a protective factor that might prevent burnout in the school social worker was the nature of the administrative relationship. Factors included in this theme were: collaborative management, support, and an understanding of the role of the school social workers.

**Collaborative management style.** The following quotes articulate the participants' thoughts regarding collaborative management style, as it relates to the administrative relationship:

*They are pretty open about that they don't use fear to govern the organization—they use progressive discipline, it's all very open with the employee—there isn't any submarining of anybody...so just a lack of fear in the management style.*

**Support.** The following quotes articulate the participants' thoughts regarding support, as it relates to the administrative relationship:

*They support as far as continuing education and workshops...always encouraging us to take advantage of those opportunities.*

*The organization is good about recognizing us and thanking us for our contributions—they notice that we are out here working hard and they tell us a lot.*

*Trust—just knowing that when I explain that this is why I did it this way that the administration will back me up.*

**Role of the school social worker.** The following quotes articulate the participants' thoughts regarding the importance of understanding the role of the school social worker, as it relates to the administrative relationship:

*My administrator really respects what I do, really knows the importance of it to kids, and respects the profession—that makes a difference.*

*I think that there has to be a feeling of support that what they are doing is important, validated, and respected.*

*My administrator, he really respected what I did, and really knew the importance of it to kids, yeah, he really, really did, and that made all the difference—he also respected the profession.*

Of the eight participants', five identified the administrative relationship as a theme that might prevent burnout. The above quotes suggest that the administrative relationship needs to be one of mutual respect, support, and understanding. School social workers want to feel that their role is valued and understood by the administration as a vital component of students' educational success.

**Organizational Climate (Protective Factors).** The first second theme identified from the data analysis as a protective factor that might prevent burnout in the school social worker was the climate of the organization. Factors included in this theme were: support, communication, and positive outlook.

**Support.** The following quotes articulate participants' thoughts regarding the importance of support from colleagues, as it relates to the organizational climate:

*Well, in general it's a supportive caring place. ...Even little things, like a thank you note or a teacher or paraprofessional who just kind of noticed something that you were doing and showed appreciation, can go a long ways.*

*Just the positive recognition that we give each other—not everybody does it, but for those who do, it's awesome!*

**Communication.** The following quotes articulate participants' thoughts regarding the importance of communication, as it relates to the organizational climate:

*Good healthy communication, feedback, constructive criticism—where people are willing to offer things in a constructive way and people who are willing to listen.*

*People are respected and listened to—I think that is really going to help with burnout.*

*Just knowing that even when things aren't going well, we can still talk about it—you know...it doesn't just get shoved under the rug.*

**Positive outlook.** The following quotes articulate participants' thought regarding keeping a positive outlook, as it relates to organizational climate:

*What has probably helped me with burnout is that I know it is always gonna work out, even when the water is starting to get up to my nose—sometimes I think just that positive outlook that things are going to be okay, not everything is going to get done the way you want, but it will get done.*

*Even though it ain't working right now, there is a time when this very easily could help...you've built a foundation...you are planting the seeds...just keeping that positive in mind.*

This theme, identified by six of the eight participants', speaks to the importance of a positive and supportive organizational climate. The above quotes demonstrate the necessity of fostering a working environment that positive and supportive of all of its employees. The

working environment should be one of open communication and collaborative decision making where all employees feel valued and heard.

**Characteristics of Clientele (Protective Factor).** The last theme identified from the data analysis as a protective organizational factor that may prevent burnout in the school social worker was characteristics of the clientele. Factors included in this theme were: variety, student successes, and attitude.

**Variety.** The following quotes articulate participants' thoughts regarding variety, as it relates to the characteristics of the clientele:

*There is a variety of issues that come up, in some ways, no day is the same, not that I like chaos, but I do like changes of pace and different challenges each day.*

*I think if you can work with a diverse group of kids, you know from different backgrounds and cultures, the more gifted and talented, more optimistic kids, you know, kids with leadership along with the kids that are having difficulties.*

*I think it helps to work with all the students, not just the kids with identified problems.*

**Successes.** The following quotes illustrate participants' thoughts regarding student success, as it relates to characteristics of clientele:

*When they get it, those 'ah hah' moments*

*I guess, seeing resilience...at least some students, and then the hope that the ones that aren't there yet, will be there.*

*I had one student who wrote a letter... 'I told you I could do it and I finally did it'...just seeing those successes.*

**Attitude.** The following quotes note participants' thoughts regarding the attitude of the students, as it relates to characteristics of clientele:

*I admire them because they show strength every day for whatever they have overcome or are enduring at that moment.*

*Seeing kids try, seeing kids have success, seeing kids fail and being okay with themselves for failing*

*Their smiles, hugs, little art drawings, their innocence, their willingness to learn.*

This theme, identified by all of the participants, spoke to the importance of the characteristics of the clientele. Participants' noted that being able to work with students in various settings and issues was a protective factor in regards to burnout. They also conveyed sincere gratitude for the little successes.

### **Discussion and Implications**

This study was designed to gain a broader understanding of the individual and organizational factors that contribute to or prevent burnout in the school social worker.

Burnout is a common experience among individuals working in the helping professions and there is a lack of research which looks critically at the experience of school social workers; this study was developed to investigate the factors, in the view of school social workers, which might contribute to burnout in the school social worker. This qualitative design and the results of this study offer an in depth understanding of school social workers in rural Minnesota public schools.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Early in the interview school social workers were asked to share their perceptions of what burn out meant to them and how they could tell if someone was experiencing burnout. Participants' responses fell in line with Maslach's Burnout Theory, which posits that burnout "consists of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach, 2003). Participants' described individuals experiencing burn out as highly negative, lacking energy, and focused on getting through their day.

The six themes identified above as contributing to or preventing burnout in the school social worker encompassed most of the contents of the semi-structured interviews with the

participants. Each theme had several factors that further clarified the relevance of the theme. Three of these themes were specifically related to individual factors that might contribute to or prevent burnout in the school social worker. The other three themes articulated the organizational factors that might contribute to or prevent burnout in the school social worker. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the individual factors, followed by the organizational factors related to burnout.

**Individual Factors Related to Burnout.** The first theme related to individual factors contributing to or preventing the likelihood of burnout in the school social worker was boundaries. This theme articulated participants' thoughts regarding the necessity of individuals being mindful of establishing clear and healthy boundaries, both professionally and personally. As a contributing factor, individuals without clear boundaries were prone to emotional and physical exhaustion as a result of ; taking their work home with them, becoming enmeshed with their clients, and taking on more than they were capable of. As a protective factor, individuals with clear boundaries were able to compartmentalize. They kept their home and work life separate; which meant, respect for their personal time and establishing some level of emotional 'detachment', so as not to get overwhelmed by the needs and issues of their students.

The second theme related to individual factors contributing to or preventing burnout in the school social worker was self-care. This theme illustrated participants' thoughts regarding the importance of school social workers remembering to care for themselves, emotionally and physically. Participants suggested that school social workers, like other individuals in helping professions, frequently neglect to take care of themselves, often times putting their client's needs before their own. As a contributing factor, school social workers may neglect to seek counseling or treatment for their own mental health issues, impacting not only themselves, but care for their students as well. As a protective factor, school social

workers who effectively incorporate self-care strategies into their lives frequently take measures to ensure that they are setting realistic expectations for themselves. They also take time to socialize and connect with others, both personally and professionally for support and for healing of, perhaps, their own mental health issues.

The last theme related to individual factors contributing to or preventing burnout in the school social worker was attitude. Participants supported the idea that a negative attitude was highly likely to contribute to burnout. In this regard, a few participants noted that, at times, they felt that they needed to be positive in spite of an overwhelming feeling of negativity all around them just to stay afloat. One participant stated it was difficult to be around staff that was *serious as can be, never smile, never joke, never humor*. Participants' also noted 'people who are always looking at the problem, but not looking toward the solution for the problem' are on the road to burnout. As a protective factor, having a sense of humor, especially the ability to laugh at yourself, was an important factor related to attitude. Several participants strongly encouraged being careful who you surround yourself with, as negativity is contagious.

**Organizational Factors Related to Burnout.** The first theme related to organizational factors contributing to or preventing the likelihood of burnout in the school social worker was the administrative relationship. The researcher understood this theme to be of utmost importance to participants' as several noted that difficulties with their administrators had, at times, led them to feel at risk for burnout. When the relationship with administration was one of micro-management, fraught with unrealistic expectations, and seemed to lack an understanding of the role of the school social worker, participants' noted burnout was likely to occur. On the other hand, when the relationship with administrators was flexible and established in such a way that they felt they could make independent decisions and be supported, that their role was understood, and felt validated for what they

did, they were less likely to experience burnout. This theme speaks to the importance of administrators incorporating supportive practices into their repertoire of working with all employees, including school social workers.

The second theme related to organizational factors contributing to or preventing burnout in the school social worker was organizational climate. This theme, as a contributing factor, illustrated how the climate of the organization can not only result in burnout for the individual, but can spread throughout the entire organization leading to a culture of negativity. Participants' included isolation as a factor when sharing organizational factors that might contribute to burnout. All of the social workers were working in rural communities, where they were the only school social worker in their building. That being said, they often felt isolated in that fact that they did not have other school social workers to collaborate with or bounce ideas off from. Other factors related to the organizational climate contributing to burnout were a lack of support and being unappreciated. Within the school setting, several school social workers felt there was a lack of understanding of the role of the school social worker. As a result, they noted that fellow colleagues occasionally had unrealistic expectations and negativity toward the school social worker if they felt that they were not doing what is expected. As a protective factor, the organizational climate can be very supportive and appreciative of the school social worker preventing the likelihood of burnout. Half of the school social workers noted a great deal of satisfaction with their organizational environment, indicating they felt appreciated and supported by their colleagues, administrators, students, and parents. They articulated through their quotes how receiving little emails, thank you notes, and words of praise were pivotal in helping them feel respected and validated for their role. This was critical as some school social workers had been in settings where they had a difficult time establishing a network of support given the limited amount of resources available.

The last theme related to organizational factors contributing to or preventing burnout in the school social worker was characteristics of clientele. This theme articulated the significance of social workers being able to truly appreciate, connect with, and see the positive when working with their students'. Of the eight social workers interviewed, four spoke directly of student populations they thought would contribute to burnout. They suggested that working only with students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) or developmental and cognitive delays (DCD) would create a significant risk for burnout, as these students are often very needy, highly anxious, and/or aggressive. As a result, social workers noted frequently experiencing these feelings when working with these students. Other participants expressed concern about working on a regular basis with students who don't want to engage in the process or take steps toward change. On the other hand, several participants felt highly encouraged by working with students who showed resilience, determination, and a positive attitude toward their own emotional and behavioral growth. Participants felt lucky in their positions to be able to work with a variety of students, which included those with difficulties. It was suggested that this variety kept them from experiencing burnout as they had the ability to change who they were working with throughout their day, giving them moments of relief from the more serious issues. One participant's quote articulated this thought the best when she said:

*Just being able to get involved in the non-crisis aspects of their day, because that is the majority of their day, whether it is going to the classroom to do a neutral group where you don't have to deal with any huge drama, or attending their pep fest, you know, to kind of not have to focus on the negative all the time.*

The themes identified above provide invaluable firsthand insight into the individual and organizational factors that can be attributed to preventing or contributing to burnout in the school social worker. While the majority of participants had not actually known anyone to experience burnout, they were extremely knowledgeable about the pathways that might

lead to burnout in the school social worker and the supports that could be incorporated to prevent it.

### **Findings Relevant to Literature**

The findings of this clinical research project appear to fit very well with the literature. First, the research findings and the literature spoke of the importance of looking at individual factors (Bledsoe et al., 2011; Barford & Whelton, 2010; Kinman & Grant, 2011; Shier & Graham, 2011; Siebert, 2005) and organizational factors (Pasupuleti et al., 2009; Boyas & Wind, 2010; Curtis et al., 2010; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009; Sowers-Hoag & Thyer, 1987) as having the potential to contribute to or prevent burnout in the social worker. Second, ample data in both the literature and this researcher's findings conveyed the importance of acknowledging and addressing the six themes identified in this clinical research project. The literature and the school social workers in this study referenced the importance of establishing good boundaries. They highlighted the importance of making sure you don't take your work home with you and find outlets that you can use, that work for you, so that you can grow personally and professionally in a positive way (Kinman & Grant, 2011). This was considered critical in order to ensure that healthy empathetic concern did not spill over into empathetic distress, resulting in negative implications for their clients and social workers alike.

Although the literature revealed scant research on self-care practices, the findings of this study suggest self-care is a vital component for professional growth, significantly decreasing the likelihood of burnout in the school social worker. Practitioners need to not only be effective in working with all aspects of client health, but must also ensure that they are healthy themselves (Moore et al., 2011), physically and mentally. This is an important contribution to the literature about burnout.

Unlike findings of the current study, there were limited references in the literature regarding the importance of having a positive attitude. The literature discussed how cynicism was a result of burnout, but did not discuss how a positive attitude could be fostered and encouraged as a means of preventing burnout in the professional. The findings of this study extend previous findings because of the emphasis on fostering a positive attitude as a protective factor related to burnout at both an organizational level and individual level.

At the organizational level, a few participants in this study suggested schools develop creative strategies to promote a positive working environment, employing such measures as “random acts of kindness and special events where staff and students could interact in relaxed and meaningful way”. Other participants noted that school social workers be mindful of the company they keep as to not become surrounded by negativity.

Finally, the research findings also fit well with the Conservation of Resources Theory and the Job-Demands Resources Theory which highlight the importance of job resources, which included support from administrators, colleagues, family, and friends. These resources were seen as invaluable in preventing burnout in the school social worker.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

The findings of this research could influence all levels of Social Work practice. At the micro-level, school social workers are able to identify individual and organizational factors that contribute to and prevent burnout and apply this knowledge to effectively prevent burnout. As a result, social workers will become more self-aware, which will in turn provide them with the skills to identify the signs of burnout in others. This could result in social workers becoming an important resource for early intervention and enable them to hone their advocacy skills.

At the meso-level, the findings of this research support the idea that those involved with the education of social work students and interested in training students for career

longevity should examine and educate social workers about the phenomenon of burnout and the various contributing factors.

Burnout also represents a significant problem for the effective administration and functioning of schools. At the organizational level, this study supports the idea that in order to retain valuable employees, school administrators need to address organizational characteristics and constraints that have been found to be linked to burnout. Organizational interventions to prevent burnout should be tailored to generate positive coping approaches which support the social worker, foster autonomy, and guide professional and personal growth. Interventions designed to enhance inter-personal and intra-personal competencies are likely to foster resilience, which, in turn, has the potential to protect the future well-being of the social worker. More research is needed before definitive conclusions can be drawn. Additional studies which incorporate a wider pool of school social workers should be undertaken to determine whether the findings of this study can be replicated.

Finally, the macro-level is also impacted by this study in that current policies can be revised or analyzed to decipher if changes are needed to prevent burnout in the school social worker. Within the profession, social workers could be encouraged to, as a part of their education, participate in counseling to emphasize the importance of caring for their own mental health. They could also, as a part of license renewal, participate in workshops specifically addressing burnout. Within the agency, administrators could develop policies that support employees participating in mental health screenings and provide a certain number of sessions with a therapist as a part of their employee benefits package.

The findings also helped the researcher identify administration measures that could be taken to improve the organizational climate, greatly decreasing the likelihood of burnout for all employees working in the school. It was insightful to learn how other schools were supporting their workers and how participants' were employing practical strategies to prevent

burnout. These thoughts and insights of the participants sparked an interest in this researcher further research into examining the strategies employed by other agencies and professionals in the field.

### **Implications for Future Research**

As discussed earlier, the participants in this study identified a strong link regarding the importance of school social workers having a positive attitude as a means of preventing future burnout. For this reason, future studies should not only examine the link between having a positive attitude, but also identify specific foster strategies that promote a positive attitude. Future studies could examine the dispositional qualities of burned-out staff members, and/or the social contingencies of reinforcement and situational factors responsible for acquisition and maintenance of burnout. They could also utilize a longitudinal design that follows school social workers from the beginning of their career over a period of time in order to establish the extent to which the establishment of boundaries, self-care, and attitude protects against the negative impact of burnout. By using longitudinal studies as well as correlation studies of individuals who experience burnout, causative factors could be identified and appropriate interventions could be tailored to ward off future burnout. Finally, future studies might also include an examination of gender, age, and ethnic differences in social work students in relation to the conceptualizations of resilience and well-being in the profession.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Due to the limited amount of research specifically addressing the experience of burnout in the school social worker, a strength of this study was it explored and sought to understand the individual and organizational factors identified by school social workers as relevant to their experience. In doing so, this study uncovered content that was not otherwise found in the literature including the importance of having a positive attitude and how living

in a different community and having to commute from a distance to work served as protective factors in the prevention of burnout. These findings open up an area for future research to identify avenues for fostering a positive attitude within the individual and the work environment to prevent burnout and identifying the unique difficulty that school social workers have in living in the same community for which they work. The fact that a qualitative design was used was also strength of this study. A qualitative design fit well with this study as it yielded rich data regarding the individual experiences of burnout for school social workers and their colleagues. Through a qualitative design, this study provided many quotes which allowed the reader to “hear” the voice of school social workers directly involved with this project in a direct and meaningful way.

There were several potential limitations to this present research study. One limitation of the present study, as with qualitative studies in general, was the relative lack of generalizability of the results. While the data, based on individual subjective reports of the selected sample of school social workers located in Central Minnesota, provided insight into the experience of rural school social workers, these participants’ experiences may not represent the larger population of school social workers in metro or urban settings or other states outside the Midwest. Another limitation of this study was the sample as the participants were predominantly white and female. While school social workers in the United States are predominantly white and female, it may be beneficial for future researchers to assess the perceptions of school social workers who represent a wider range of gender, racial and ethnic backgrounds. Finally, the fact that all of the participants chose to be interviewed over the phone was a potential limitation of this study, as telephone interview lack face-to-face nonverbal cues, which are often used to pace the interview and provide clues as to what direction to move in.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Burnout in the School Social Worker: Related Individual and Organizational Practices**

#### **INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM**

##### **Introduction:**

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating individual and organizational practices which contribute to or prevent burnout in the school social worker. This study is being conducted by Melissa A. Sutlief, a graduate student at the University of St. Thomas/College of St. Catherine under the supervision of Karen Carlson, a faculty member in the School of Social Work. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because of your professional experiences as a school social worker in Central Minnesota. Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be in the study.

##### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to identify individual and organizational practices that contribute to or prevent burnout in the professional school social worker.

##### **Procedures:**

As a participant in this study you will be asked to participate in an interview conducted by myself, lasting 45-60 minutes. This interview could be done in person or over the phone if the distance is prohibitive. Meetings held in person will be in an agreed upon location identified as being private. You will be asked to allow the interview to be audio-taped for the purpose of later being transcribed. In the interview you will be asked a series of questions which will clarify what your understanding is of burnout in the professional. You will be asked to share your thoughts about what contributes to burnout in the school social worker looking at individual, organizational, and clientele characteristics. You will also be asked to talk about your experiences with burnout, either personally or working with someone who has burned out professionally. Finally, you will be asked to talk about your understanding of self-care and resilience and how they might prevent burnout in the school social worker.

##### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

There are no direct benefits for your participation in this study.

There is potential for some risk for your participation in this study. Discussing burnout could be uncomfortable or discouraging. For this reason, at the conclusion of the interview I will talk with you about who you might contact in your community to further discuss your concerns regarding burnout.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. All transcription will be completed by the researcher. Research records and an electronic copy of the transcript will be kept in a password-protected computer file. A research partner will see a transcript of the interview, but will not know who you are. I will delete any identifying information from the transcript. Findings from the transcript will be presented to my research class. The audiotape and transcript will be destroyed at the end of Second Semester 2012-2013.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and may stop the interview at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Catherine University, the University of St. Thomas, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used in this study.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Melissa A. Sutlief, at (320) 874-0107. You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, my Clinical Research Chair for this project, Karen Carlson, (651) 962-5867. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you may also contact Dr. Eleni Roulis, Acting Chair of the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board, at (651) 962-5341.

**You may keep a copy of this form for your records.**

**Statement of Consent:**

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time.

I consent to participate in the study. I also consent to have the interview audio-taped.

---

Signature of Participant

Date

---

Signature of Researcher

Date

## Appendix B

The main research question for this qualitative study is: What are the individual and organizational practices that contribute to or prevent burnout in the professional school social worker?

### Interview Schedule

1. Age and Gender
2. What is your educational background? Degree? Licensure?
3. How long have you worked in the school setting?
4. Are you the only social worker in your school? If so, how do you see that impacting your work?
5. What do you think has contributed to your length of service in the school system?
6. What is burnout, in your opinion? How can you tell if someone is burned out?
  - a. Some of the defining characteristics of burnout are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and cynicism.
7. What is your experience in working with professionals who have burned out?
8. In your experience, what characteristics of social workers *contribute to* the likelihood of burnout?
9. What situational or cultural factors of agency *contribute to* the social workers likelihood of burnout?
10. In your experience, what characteristics of the student population *contribute to* the likelihood of burnout?
11. In your experience, what characteristics of social workers *prevent* burnout?
12. What situational or cultural factors of agency *prevent* burnout for professional social workers?
13. In your experience, what characteristics of the student population *prevent* the likelihood of burnout?

14. What does professional *resilience* mean to you? What role does *resilience* play in preventing burnout in the social worker?
15. In your experience, what *self-care* practices prevent burnout?
16. What do you think the profession could do to better prepare professional social workers to cope with issues of burnout?
17. Have you personally experienced burnout? If so, what do you think *contributed* to it? What do you think could have *prevented* it?
18. Is anything else you would like to add about your experiences or understanding of burnout in the school social worker?

## Appendix C

### Introductory Email...

Hello, my name is Melissa Sutlief. I am currently a graduate student at St. Thomas University/ St. Catherine's University. Having been a school social worker for the past 19 years, I am very interested in the perspectives of other school social workers in relation to professional burnout, looking specifically at organizational and individual practices that contribute to or prevent burnout in the professional School Social Worker.

I would like you to consider if you would be willing to participate in a 45-60 minute interview with me. Of course, your comments would be strictly confidential. I will review a consent form explaining the process and outlining how your rights will be protected throughout the research with you before beginning the interview. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Please respond in person, over the phone, or by email to let me know if you would be willing to allow me to interview you. I can be reached at (320) 594-6299 or (320) 874-0107.

Sincerely,

Melissa A. Sutlief, LSW  
School Social Worker

### Follow-Up Email...

Hello!

Thank you so much for being willing to participate in my graduate clinical research project. I am very much looking forward to scheduling an interview with you. The interview could be done over the phone or in person, whichever is your preference or at your convenience. I have attached a copy of the interview schedule so that you are familiar with what we will be discussing. Also attached is a copy of the participant letter and informed consent! We will discuss those at the beginning of the interview as well!

Please contact me at your earliest convenience. I can best be reached at (320) 874-0107.

I will be in touch!

Melissa A. Sutlief, LSW  
School Social Worker

## Appendix D

February 6, 2013

### **Dear Participant:**

Hello! My name is Melissa Sutlief. I am a graduate student at St. Thomas University/College of St. Catherine in the School of Social Work Program. Under the supervision of Karen Carlson, a faculty member in the School of Social Work, I will be conducting a clinical research study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Having been a school social worker myself for the past 19 years, I am very interested in the perspectives of other school social workers regarding professional burnout. The purpose of my study is to investigate the individual and organizational practices which contribute to or prevent burnout in the school social worker.

You were selected as a possible participant in this research because of your years of experience working as a social worker in a rural Minnesota public school with a minimum of 3 years of experience in the field. Your participation is important to this research and I appreciate your taking the time to help. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as a part of my research.

### **Procedures:**

As a participant in this study you will be asked to participate in an interview conducted by myself, lasting 45-60 minutes. This interview could be done in person or over the phone if the distance is prohibitive. Meetings held in person will be in an agreed upon location identified as being private. You will be asked to allow the interview to be audio-taped for the purpose of later being transcribed by myself. In the interview you will be asked a series of questions which will clarify what your understanding is of burnout in the professional. You will be asked to share your thoughts about what contributes to burnout in the school social worker looking at individual, organizational, and clientele characteristics. You will also be asked to talk about your experiences with burnout, either personally or working with someone who has burned out professionally. Finally, you will be asked to talk about your understanding of self-care and resilience and how they might prevent burnout in the school social worker.

### **Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. Research records and an electronic copy of the transcript will be kept in a password-protected computer file. Findings from the transcript will be presented to my research class. The audiotape and transcript will be destroyed at the end of Second Semester 2012-2013.

**Risk and Benefits of Participation:**

There are no direct benefits for your participation in this study.

There is potential for some risk for your participation in this study. Discussing burnout could be uncomfortable or discouraging. For this reason, at the conclusion of the interview I will talk with you about who you might contact in your community to further discuss your concerns regarding burnout.

**Voluntary:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and may stop the interview at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Catherine University, the University of St. Thomas, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used in this study.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Melissa A. Sutlief, at (320) 874-0107. You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, my Clinical Research Chair for this project, Karen Carlson, (651) 962-5867. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you may also contact Dr. Eleni Roulis, University of St. Thomas at (651) 962-5341.

Sincerely,

Melissa A. Sutlief, LSW

School Social Worker