

Towards a Model of Law School Stressors

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My background

- I am a doctoral student in Community Psychology at DePaul University
- What is Community Psychology?
 - Examines the role of *context* on psychological outcomes

Why law students?

- Law students:
 - Are particularly at risk for anxiety, depression & substance abuse (Beck et al., 1996; Kellner et al., 1986; Shanfield & Benjamin, 1985)
 - Have higher levels of psychological symptoms than the general population (Wilson, 2001)
 - Have higher subjective ratings of stressors (Helmers et al., 1997) & depression, hostility & obsessions/compulsions than medical students (Kellner et al.)

Why law students?

- Prior to starting law school, law students had higher ratings of subjective well-being, positive affect & satisfaction with life compared to undergraduate students (Sheldon & Krieger, 2004)
- Law students' show significant declines in subjective well-being, positive affect, satisfaction with life, & significant increases in negative affect during 1st & 3rd years compared to assessments prior to starting law school (Sheldon & Krieger; Sheldon & Krieger)

How are these symptoms & declines explained?

- Law school stressors are frequently cited and described (Archer & Peters, 1986; Benjamin et al., 1986; Iijima, 1998; McIntosh et al., 1994; Segerstrom, 1996; Sheehy & Horan, 2004; Wilson, 2001)
- A well-validated, psychometrically sound instrument for measuring law school stressors does not exist
- As a result, linking law school stressors to student mental health is difficult
- Hence, the goal of my dissertation research is to develop a law school stressor measure based on non-empirical literature, student responses, & psychological theories of stress & principles for assessing stressors

Stimulus-response model of stress

- Stressors: “environmental stimuli that *commonly* produce psychological or physical distress in an organism” (Hobfoll et al., p. 183)
- Stress: Distress or strain resulting from stressors

Methodology

- This study involves three phases
- The focus of my presentation will involve the findings from Phase 1 of this study
- All data will be collected at two law schools within large, Midwestern, urban, private universities

Phase 1

- Goal: Develop, pilot, & refine the law school stressor measure (LSSM)
- Procedure:
 - Analysis of 100 graduating law students' responses to the question:
 - Looking back, what would you say was very stressful about your law school experience? (If many things were very stressful or different times were stressful for different reasons, please list all.)
 - A small group of students will also complete the LSSM & provide feedback prior to the implementation of the LSSM in Phases 2 & 3

Phase 2

- Goals:
 - Assess which factors underlie the LSSM
 - Determine how well LSSM predicts other important constructs
- Procedure:
 - Ask current law students to complete LSSM using an online database
 - Projected sample size: 300
- Also assessing:
 - Demographics
 - Psychological symptoms
 - General life stress
 - Academic achievement (GPA)

Phase 3

- Goals:
 - Determine how stable LSSM scores are over time
 - Determine how well LSSM predicts psychological symptoms
- Procedure: Participants will be randomly selected and asked to complete LSSM and measure of psychological symptoms again
 - Projected sample size: 120

Discussion

- What do you think students reported as being the most stressful about their law school experiences?

Findings

- Exams
- Time/Balance
- Confusion
- Building/Setting characteristics
- Socratic Method
- Grades
- Grade curving
- Relationships with peers/classmates
- Finances
- Curriculum problems
- Job/Finding a job
- Concerns about future

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