

**The Influence of Personal and Professional Characteristics on School  
Counselors' Recognition and Reporting of Child Sexual Abuse**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated personal and professional predictors of professional school counselors' ( $N = 220$ ) accurate recognition and appropriate reporting of child sexual abuse. Additionally, this study examined instances when school counselors suspected child sexual abuse but intentionally elected not to report it and explored considerations that were influential in the decision-making process. Results indicated that personal and professional characteristics of the school counselor did not predict recognition and appropriate reporting of child sexual abuse but did contribute to the decision-making process when deciding to make a mandated report.

*Keywords:* sexual abuse, professional school counselor, mandated reporting

## **The Influence of Personal and Professional Characteristics on School Counselors' Recognition and Reporting of Child Sexual Abuse**

In 2015, an estimated 3.5 million suspected cases of child abuse were reported in the United States with cases of child sexual abuse (CSA) accounting for 8.5 percent of those reports (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2018). The majority of reports involving CSA were made by professionals employed in school settings (USDHHS, 2018). Because children's education is compulsory in the United States, professionals, including school counselors, interact with children on a daily basis thereby placing them in unique positions to recognize and report suspected child maltreatment (Feng, Huang, & Wang, 2010; Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008; King & Scott, 2014).

All school professionals in the United States are mandated by law to report suspected cases of CSA (USDHHS, 2018), thus giving professional school counselors (PSCs) a direct responsibility as mandated reporters. Suspected child abuse cases from school personnel account for most of all mandated reports being made; however, this same group of educators often do not report situations involving suspected child abuse (Kenny, 2004). Regardless of the strict criminal and civil penalties for failing to report, some mandated reporters have been inconsistent in their reporting practices (Feng et al., 2010; Kapoor & Zonana, 2010; Lusk, Zibulsky, & Viezel, 2015). Reasons for these inconsistencies include personal attitudes, beliefs, or other characteristics (Ashton, 2004; Bunting, Lazenbatt, & Wallace, 2010) exhibited by the mandated reporter. It has been suggested that these personal and professional characteristics influence a mandated reporter's likelihood to report (Feng et al., 2010). Based on these discrepant

mandated reporting practices, the present study examines specific personal and professional characteristics that may influence the PSC's accurate recognition and appropriate reporting of CSA.

### **Personal Influences on Mandated Reporting**

Personal motivations towards reporting can be a strong predictor of the likelihood to report suspected child abuse (Alvarez, Kenny, Donohue, & Carpin, 2004; Delaronde, King, Bendel, & Reece, 2000). When challenged with ethical dilemmas, individuals will use moral judgments to assist in decision-making (Piaget, 1965). Moral judgments are believed to be situation specific (Rest, 1984) in which the individual will select the most morally justifiable course of action (Rest & Narvaez, 1994). For PSCs, the most morally justifiable course of action may not always be consistent with appropriately reporting suspected CSA. For example, there may be times when PSCs believe that the outcome of making a mandated report will potentially place the child in a significantly worse situation.

Additional courses of action with appropriately reporting suspected CSA can be influenced by personal motivators such as individual personal beliefs. Mandated reporters who hold more positive personal attitudes regarding commitment and comprehension of professional role and responsibilities, confidence in the child protection system to respond effectively to a mandated report, and lower concerns about consequences of mandated reports are more likely to appropriately report (Walsh, Mathews, Rassafiani, Farrell, & Butler, 2012b). It is for these reasons that the concepts of moral decision making, commitment, confidence, and concern are examined as personal influential factors in PSCs decision-making process to appropriately report.

## **Moral Reasoning**

Moral reasoning is a relevant variable to consider in the reporting of CSA. Based on Kohlberg's (1958) model of moral development, Rest (1986) posited that moral decision making is comprised of four components: moral sensitivity (understanding the effects of courses of action), moral judgment (deciphering which alternative is just or right), moral motivation (placing moral values higher than other values), and moral character (doing what is right no matter what the consequence). Kohlberg (1981) asserted that, at the post-conventional level of moral development, individuals are less likely to base moral decisions on rule governed behaviors and are more likely to be influenced by abstract principles regarding the greater good. For mandated reporters, this theoretical underpinning of moral reasoning suggests that individuals may select a course of action considered to be more morally justifiable and not necessarily congruent with a universal standard (Rest & Narvaez, 1994).

## **Commitment**

Individuals who are committed to and comprehend their professional responsibilities as mandated reporters are likely to hold more favorable attitudes towards reporting suspected child maltreatment (Crenshaw, Crenshaw, & Lichtenberg, 1995; Feng et al., 2010). In a recent nationwide study of PSCs, Bryant (2009) found that one of the strongest influences in deciding to report CSA was the PSC's commitment to follow the law. However, there are times when the commitment to follow the law of mandated reporting is outweighed by the fear of making a false report (Kenny, 2001).

## **Confidence**

Confidence in the child protection system to respond effectively to a mandated report is also related to the decision to report suspected CSA. Child Protective Service departments (CPS) often lack appropriate funding and staffing among other hindrances that may prevent effective responses to claims of child maltreatment (Knox, Pelletier, & Vieth, 2014). PSCs see this lack of funding and staffing as an obstacle that makes CPS untimely and ineffective (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010). Understandably, there tends to be a common attitude of perceived inadequacy, distrust (Crenshaw et al., 1995), and a low confidence in the efficacy (Kenny, 2001; King, Reece, Bendel, & Patel, 1998) of CPS among mandated reporters. Moreover, some mandated reporters believe that an intervention by CPS would actually do more harm than good (King et al., 1998). To the contrary, mandated reporters who believe in the professionalism and success of CPS were found to be more likely to report child abuse than those who do not (O'Toole, Webster, O'Toole, & Lucal, 1999). PSCs reported that their perceptions of the effectiveness of CPS played a role in one's decision to report child abuse (Bryant, 2009).

## **Concern**

Concerns about consequences of mandated reports have been found to potentially inhibit making a report of suspected child abuse (Abrahams, Casey, & Daro, 1992; Alvarez et al., 2004; O'Toole et al., 1999; Smyth, 1996). There is a common fear of legal consequences for making an unfounded report (Alvarez et al., 2004; Kenny, 2001). Mandated reporters are protected from liability if they make the report in good faith (Foreman & Bernet, 2000; USDHHS, 2018); however, the fear of civil action can

still be present in the decision-making process (Matthews, Walsh, Butler, & Farrell, 2006; Matthews & Kenny, 2008). Mandated reporters may also fear for their own safety and well-being after making a suspected report of child abuse (Bavolek, 1983; Zellman, 1990; Zellman & Bell, 1990) as the accused abuser could retaliate against the reporter if the identity becomes known. Another concern is that a mandated child abuse report is likely to cause a disruption in the family system and potentially have an impact on rapport developed between the counselor and the family (Kenny, 2001). Others may be concerned that reporting suspected child maltreatment will actually do more harm than good (Delaronde et al., 2000; Kenny, 2001). According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), PSCs have a primary obligation to the student (ASCA, 2016); therefore, one of the biggest factors influencing a decision to report CSA should be the PSC's concern for the safety of the student (Bryant, 2009).

### **Professional Influences on Mandated Reporting**

A number of studies have concluded that both more years of experience as a mandated reporter (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Kenny, 2001; O'Toole et al., 1999; Rodriguez, 2002) and higher amounts of training on mandated reporting (Hawkins & McCallum, 2001; Kenny, 2004; Walsh, Bridgstock, Farrell, Rassafiani, & Schweitzer, 2008) are predictors of increased knowledge related to a mandated reporters' ability to identify and report child abuse (Renninger, Veach, & Bagdade, 2002; Walsh et al, 2012b). Therefore, the influences of experience and training may be closely examined as considerations for mandated reporting.

## **Experience**

The influence of a mandated reporter's age on reporting behaviors is likely confounded by years of experience (Rodriguez, 2002). Experienced educators are more likely to report child abuse (Kenny, 2001). Additionally, experience in making past reports is directly related to a mandated reporter's ability to recognize child abuse and appropriately report (O'Toole et al., 1999). Educators who have made past reports of CSA were found to be more knowledgeable about mandated reporting behavior and were more likely to report suspected cases (Walsh et al., 2012b). A large majority of PSCs reported that the most frequently endorsed method of acquiring knowledge was through recollection of past experiences of reporting child abuse (Bryant, 2009).

## **Training**

In addition to knowing how and when to report suspected cases of child maltreatment, mandated reporters also need to be knowledgeable of the signs and symptoms of child abuse and should receive formal training in mandated reporting laws (Baxter & Beer, 1990). In school settings, research suggests that in-service education is effective at increasing the knowledge of mandated reporters (Feng, Wu, Fetzer, & Chang, 2012). It is believed that between 10 to 20 hours of formal didactic programming may improve a mandated reporter's knowledge and attitudes about child abuse, thus resulting in a greater ability to recognize it and an increased likelihood to report (King et al., 1998). PSCs found CSA training most helpful in their roles as mandated reporters in the areas of reporter responsibilities, reporting procedures, and the law (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010). However, additional training is still needed. PSCs requested that more

training be offered in specific types of child abuse that are significantly more difficult to identify such as sexual abuse (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010).

The amount of training may have little impact on the decision to report when there is clear evidence of abuse (Hawkins & McCallum, 2001). However, when the evidence of abuse is unclear or unconvincing and the willingness to report is decreased, training was found to increase the likelihood to appropriately report (Hawkins & McCallum, 2001). Training must be deemed beneficial to the professional in order to be effective. Some educators reported that their in-service (on-the-job training) preparation did not adequately train them to make child abuse reports (Kenny, 2001; 2004). A deficiency in training leaves many mandated reporters with a lack of understanding the signs and symptoms of child abuse (Alvarez et al., 2004; Kalichman, 1999). Due to a lack of knowledge regarding child abuse, mandated child abuse reports are potentially not made (Knox et al., 2014).

### **Importance of the Study**

Although the vast majority of PSCs follow through with making mandated reports of suspected cases of abuse (Bryant, 2009), inconsistencies still exist in mandated reporting practices (Feng et al., 2010; Kapoor & Zonana, 2010; Lusk et al., 2015). The personal and professional influences that impact these inconsistencies should be examined so that PSCs can gain an increased level of self-awareness into factors that may contribute to appropriately reporting CSA. By increasing the awareness of personal and professional influences on mandated reporting practices, PSCs will improve the safety and protection for all children under their care.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate predictors of the PSC's accurate recognition and appropriate reporting of CSA. Specifically, this study examined predictors related to personal characteristics (i.e., level of moral reasoning and attitudes) and professional characteristics (i.e., experience and training) of PSCs. This study also explored instances where PSCs suspected CSA but elected not to report.

The following research questions were examined:

1. Do personal characteristics predict PSCs accurate recognition and appropriate reporting of CSA?
2. Do professional characteristics predict PSCs accurate recognition and appropriate reporting of CSA?
3. What considerations were taken by PSCs when CSA was suspected and not reported?

## Method

### Participants

The target population, from which a sample was drawn, included PSCs in the United States who were ASCA members. ASCA members were recruited through a membership email directory. Completed surveys were collected from 226 PSCs. Reliability checks resulted in the removal of four surveys identified as random responses. A Mahalanobis' distance screening led to the exclusion of two additional cases identified as outliers. Therefore, the elimination of six surveys during the pre-screening resulted in a final sample size of  $N = 220$ .

The sample ( $N = 220$ ) in this study consisted of 15% male ( $n = 33$ ) and 85% female ( $n = 187$ ) PSCs throughout the United States (including the District of Columbia)

who were employed at both public ( $n = 198$ , 90%) and private ( $n = 22$ , 10%) elementary ( $n = 68$ , 31%), middle ( $n = 72$ , 33%), and high ( $n = 80$ , 36%) schools in rural ( $n = 67$ , 31%), urban ( $n = 45$ , 20%), and suburban ( $n = 108$ , 49%) communities. The vast majority of PSCs ( $n = 184$ ; 84%) in this study had experience reporting CSA. The ages of participants ranged from 24-68 ( $M = 45$ ). Regarding racial and ethnic identity, 86.8% were Caucasian ( $n = 191$ ), 5.9% were African-American ( $n = 13$ ), 4.1 % were Hispanic ( $n = 1$ ), 1.4% were Asian ( $n = 3$ ), and 1.4% were Multiracial ( $n = 3$ ). Additionally, with respect to religious affiliation, 74.1% identified as Christian ( $n = 163$ ), 3.2% as Jewish ( $n = 7$ ), 9.1% as Atheist/Agnostic ( $n = 20$ ), and 13.7% as no preference or other ( $n = 30$ ). The majority of participants identified as female, Caucasian, and Christian.

## Measures

This study used the following two measures. The Defining Issues Test, Version 2 (DIT-2; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999) was used to measure moral reasoning. The Teacher Reporting Questionnaire (TRQ; Matthews, Walsh, Rassafiani, Butler, & Farrell, 2009) was used to measure personal characteristics (i.e., commitment, confidence, and concern) and professional characteristics (i.e., experience and training). In addition to the above two measures, six scenarios from the TRQ were used to measure the PSC's accurate recognition and appropriate reporting of CSA.

**Defining Issues Test-2 (DIT-2).** The DIT-2 is based on Rest's (1986) four component model which indicates that ethical decision making consists of four components: sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and character. The DIT-2 retains the same psychometric properties as the DIT, however, it also improves on clarity, brevity, and validity (Xu, Iran-Nejad, & Thoma, 2007). The DIT-2 activates and assesses moral

schemas in terms of importance of judgments and provides a measure of an individual's level of principled moral reasoning (Center for the Study of Ethical Development, 2013). The DIT-2 has been shown to be reliable as Cronbach's alpha is in the upper .70s to low .80s, which has been confirmed in test-retest reliability (Rest et al., 1999), thus indicating the measure has good internal consistency.

The DIT-2 has five dilemmas which include a father stealing food from a rich man for his starving family, a newspaper reporter providing a negative story about a political candidate, a school board member deciding to hold an open meeting that could be damaging, a doctor killing a patient to stop suffering, and college students protesting US foreign policy. Participants were asked to choose one of three immediate possible courses of action based on each dilemma presented. Each dilemma has 12 statements on a Likert-type scale (1 = "No importance" to 5 = "Great importance") that could be part of the decision-making process. In addition, respondents rated each of the 12 issues by choosing the first, second, third, and fourth most important issues for each of the five dilemmas. These answers contributed to the scoring of the test and are included in this study as the N2 score. N2 scores can range from 0-95 and higher scores indicate a greater level of moral reasoning. The N2 score is the newest and improved way of scoring the DIT, as it more accurately determines post-conventional thinking (Rest, Thoma, Narvaez, & Bebeau, 1997). Higher N2 scores indicate a higher level of moral reasoning and decision making.

**Teacher Reporting Questionnaire (TRQ).** The TRQ is a self-administered survey based on previous research concerning mandated reporting practices. The TRQ consists of eight sections that collect data about respondent's demographics, job

responsibility, education and training, previous CSA reporting history, attitudes about reporting CSA, knowledge of requirements to report CSA under school policies, knowledge of requirements to report CSA under legislation, and responses to six CSA scenarios. With permission of the authors, a TRQ was modified in order to use language consistent with PSCs in the United States as opposed to teachers in Australia.

Data were selected from the 14-item Teacher Reporting Attitude Scale (TRAS-CSA; Walsh, Rassafiani, Matthews, Farrel, & Butler, 2012a), which consisted of three subscales measuring commitment, confidence, and concern. The items were scored on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = “strongly agree” to 5 = “strongly disagree”) and each respondent received a score for each of the three subscales. Higher scores indicate that the PSC shows a greater commitment and comprehension of professional role and responsibilities; has more confidence in the child protection system to respond effectively to a mandated report; and holds significant concerns about consequences of mandated reports. Cronbach’s alpha for each factor of the TRAS-CSA are reported as follows: commitment (0.77), confidence (0.62), and concern (0.66).

The TRQ was also used for data collection in instances where PSCs suspected CSA but intentionally elected not to report. PSCs answered 9 items on a four-point, Likert-type scale (1 = “not at all important” to 4 = “very important”) to indicate how important certain factors were in the decision to not report. Higher scores indicated that a specific factor in one’s decision to not report suspected CSA was of utmost importance. Conversely, lower scores indicated that specific factors were of little importance.

Aggregated scores were calculated from the final section of the TRQ which anticipated future reporting using six scenarios of possible CSA. All scenarios described children who were of an age that would require mandated reports under all state laws if CSA was suspected. After reading each scenario, participants were prompted to answer either yes or no when asked if reasonable ground existed to suspect CSA. One point was awarded for each scenario the participant answered correctly thereby awarding each participant a score ranging from 0-6. Higher scores indicated a greater ability in CSA recognition. Participants were prompted to answer either yes or no when asked if the participant would report the case. One point was awarded for each scenario the participant answered correctly awarding each participant a score ranging from 0-6. Higher scores indicated that the PSC was more likely to appropriately report CSA.

### **Procedures**

Upon approval from an institutional review board, a link to the survey was distributed to participants by way of email through Survey Monkey, which described the purpose and risks of the study and estimated time involved for participants. Once participants followed the link to the online survey, they were first instructed to read the online informed consent and explicitly agree to the conditions before beginning the survey. Participants were then informed that they were under no obligation to participate in this study and that they were free to withdraw their consent at any time. If a participant chose to withdraw or submitted an incomplete survey, any information collected was immediately deleted.

## Results

Scores for the dependent variable (ability to recognize CSA) ranged from 2-6 ( $M = 4.80$ ;  $SD = .941$ ) and scores for the dependent variable (likelihood to appropriately report CSA) ranged from 2-6 ( $M = 4.88$ ;  $SD = .901$ ). The N2 Scores used to determine level of moral reasoning ranged from 0-75 ( $M = 38.53$ ,  $SD = 14.44$ ). Quantitative scores consisted of summations from the additional three personal characteristics. The commitment scores ranged from 21-30 ( $M = 28.47$ ,  $SD = 1.900$ ), the confidence scores ranged from 3-15 ( $M = 11.00$ ,  $SD = 2.193$ ), and the concern scores ranged from 11-25 ( $M = 20.75$ ,  $SD = 3.115$ ). Years of experience ranged from 2 to 33 years ( $M = 11.21$ ,  $SD = 7.008$ ) and total hours of in-service training in the last year ranged from 0 to 80 ( $M = 13.66$ ,  $SD = 17.834$ ). Eighty-four percent of PSCs in this study made a report of suspected CSA an average of eight times in the course of a career.

### Personal and Professional Characteristic Predictors

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine if personal (moral reasoning, commitment, confidence, and concern) and professional characteristics (experience and training) predicted the PSCs' accurate recognition and appropriate reporting of CSA. Regression results indicated that personal characteristics did not predict the PSC's accurate recognition and appropriate reporting of CSA. Regression results also indicated that professional characteristics in mandated reporting did not predict PSC's accurate recognition and appropriate reporting of CSA.

### Personal and Professional Characteristic Correlations

There was a very strong, statistically significant positive relationship between PSCs' accurate recognition and appropriate reporting of CSA ( $r(118) = .839$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

A minor, statistically significant negative relationship was found between commitment and confidence, ( $r(118) = -.277, p < .001$ ); a moderate statistically significant negative relationship between commitment and concern ( $r(118) = -.399, p < .001$ ); and a moderate, statistically significant positive relationship between confidence and concern ( $r(118) = .341, p < .001$ ). In addition, a minor, statistically significant negative relationship was found between concern and experience ( $r(118) = -.168, p < .05$ ); and concern and training ( $r(118) = -.173, p < .05$ ).

### **Results of Unreported Instances of Recognized Child Sexual Abuse**

In this study, 7.3% of PSCs ( $n = 17$ ) reported suspecting CSA at one time or another and intentionally elected not to report. PSCs were most likely to not report suspected cases of CSA if they did not have enough evidence to be sure abuse happened ( $M = 3.71; SD = .772$ ). The second most important factor in a decision to not report was the fear that reporting would cause more harm than good to the child ( $M = 2.41; SD = 1.228$ ). The third most important factor in a PSC's decision to not report was the belief that CPS were unlikely to provide effective help ( $M = 2.29; SD = 1.359$ ). The fourth and final factor considered to be of high importance when deciding to not report was the belief that it was better to work through the issue with the family first ( $M = 1.59; SD = .939$ ). The remaining factors considered by PSCs in not reporting suspected CSA, notably found to be of little importance, included the following: fearing retaliation by parent(s)/community members ( $M = 1.41; SD = .870$ ); fear that the child would be removed from the family ( $M = 1.18; SD = .529$ ); and fear of being sued for making an unsubstantiated report ( $M = 1.12; SD = .332$ ). Lastly, the least important factors in a PSC's decision to not report suspected CSA included a concern about

possible damage to the school's relationship with the children or their parents ( $M = 1.06$ ;  $SD = .243$ ) and simply not knowing how to report ( $M = 1.06$ ;  $SD = .243$ ).

### **Discussion**

There was a strong positive relationship between PSCs' accurate recognition of suspected CSA and their likelihood to appropriately report. This finding is consistent with Bryant (2009) who found that PSCs followed through in reporting the majority of the cases they identified as CSA. When PSCs recognize CSA, they appear to be likely to fulfill their mandated reporting role in reporting CSA.

### **Personal Influences on Mandated Reporting**

PSCs' commitment to and comprehension of the mandated reporting role, their confidence in CPS, and concern about the potential consequences of reporting were not predictors of accurate recognition and appropriate reporting of CSA. In contrast, studies suggested that commitment to and understanding of the role of the mandated reporter, confidence in CPS, and concern for the potential consequences are related to accurate recognition and appropriate reporting (Delaronde et al., 2000; Kenny, 2001). Our findings do not suggest that PSCs lack concern for CSA situations. In fact, nearly all of the PSCs who believed that a case vignette reflected suspected CSA indicated that they would make the mandated report. However, PSCs did exhibit a high level of fear of the consequences for the child when making a report. One interpretation as to why PSCs' perceptions regarding reporting were not related to their accurate recognition and appropriate reporting relates to PSCs' previous reporting practices and history with CPS.

Higher levels of PSC commitment and comprehension of the professional role and responsibilities of reporting CSA was related to lower levels of confidence in CPS's effectiveness in responding to mandated reports and lower levels of concern about the potential negative consequences of reporting abuse. It is possible that PSCs who are more committed to their mandated reporting role have a better understanding of the considerable legal protections afforded to mandated reporters. A potential implication is that increasing PSCs' understanding of their legal protections may also serve to increase their commitment. In addition, PSCs who express less confidence in CPS report greater concern about the potential consequences for reporting. This finding is consistent with literature suggesting a substantial number of mandated reporters believed that CPS operates ineffectively, intervenes inadequately, and could potentially do more harm than good (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Kenny, 2001; King et al., 1998).

Regarding the lack of significance related to a PSC's moral reasoning and recognizing and appropriately reporting CSA, it is possible that stage 4 reasoning of Kohlberg's (1981) theory, which involves an understanding of laws and rules, is sufficient for applying legal reasoning regarding identifying CSA. The instrument used in this study, the DIT-2 (Rest, 1986) measured principled moral reasoning, which represents stage 5 of Kohlberg's (1981) theory. It can be argued that the regulations concerning the reporting of CSA have been made so clear that higher order moral reasoning is not essential for recognizing the abstract principles involved in suspected CSA. Rather, it may be that other aspects of Rest's (1986) four component model of moral behavior, such as ego strength, may be more relevant in whether a PSC fulfills

their mandated reporter role, particularly as it relates to making a report of suspected CSA.

### **Professional Influences on Mandated Reporting**

Whereas previous studies of educators have revealed that training and professional experience were predictors of accurate recognition and appropriate reporting of child maltreatment (King et al., 1998; Kenny, 2001), this study showed that training and experience were not found to be predictors among PSCs. PSCs were generally effective in recognition and appropriate reporting of CSA, which may suggest that PSCs receive sufficient preparation as mandated reporters during their graduate-level training. Most states require a master's degree for school counseling certification or licensure, and thus experience and post-graduate training may not be as essential for accurate recognition and appropriate reporting of CSA.

It is notable that PSCs with in-service training in the last 12 months related to CSA showed less concern about the potential consequences of making mandated reports. Training may be most effective when various child protective agencies can interface with PSCs. These trainings can clarify the process of what happens when a CSA report is filed, how the child is protected, how the reporter is protected, and what to do if the PSC has questions about the process. Like any other type of consultation, building relationships between schools and agencies will increase the likelihood of working closely together, and in this case, improve the safety and care for children.

Additionally, PSCs with more years of experience also showed a lower level of concern about potential consequences of mandated reporting. One interpretation of this finding could be that PSCs experience desensitization to the problem of child abuse

over the course of one's career (O'Toole et al., 1999). It is possible that seasoned PSCs have experienced more positive outcomes with the reporting process, thereby outweighing any negative fears.

### **Unreported Instances of Recognized Child Sexual Abuse**

In this study, 7.3% of PSCs suspected CSA at one time or another and intentionally elected not to report. One of the most cited factors among PSCs for not reporting suspected cases of CSA was lacking sufficient evidence to be sure abuse actually happened. Lacking enough evidence was also the most influential factor in a PSCs decision to not report child abuse (Bryant, 2009) and a key component found in other similar studies (Bunting et al., 2010). This belief could be due to a misinterpretation of the law and having a lack of knowledge with respect to the evidence required of a mandated reporter (Alvarez et al., 2004; Feng et al., 2012; Kenny, 2004). PSCs must understand that in the capacity as a mandated reporter, they are not evidence collectors or investigators of CSA. Based on one's training and experience as a mandated reporter, the PSC should take into consideration specific facts about a suspected case of CSA and formulate a rational suspicion.

Because the PSC is not a direct witness to CSA, the decision to report requires a degree of certainty known as the reasonable cause standard (Behun, Owens, & Cerrito, 2015). Reasonable cause is a relatively low degree of certainty with regard to understanding mandated reporting of CSA, particularly because this standard does not require the mandated reporter to believe, but rather to reasonably suspect (based on experience, training, and specific facts) that CSA has taken place (Behun et al., 2015).

The fear of legal consequences for making an unfounded report is a common concern as well. An unsubstantiated report does not mean that the report was inaccurately made (Krase & DeLong-Hamilton, 2015). Mandated reporters who use professional judgment when making reports about abuse are immune from liability if a report is unfounded. PSCs must understand that mandated reporting laws are, above all else, created for the protection of children. By encouraging such reports of suspected abuse, state laws will protect those mandated reporters who act in good faith, but also punish those who fail to appropriately report.

Another common reason that played an important role in PSCs decision to not report suspected cases of CSA was the fear that reporting would cause more harm to the child than good. Findings in this study are consistent with the literature, many PSCs believe reporting will make the situation worse for the child. It is difficult to dispel this belief, because it is a possibility. The possibility for a child to experience negative repercussions is a cause for resistance to report (Sikes, Remley, & Hays, 2010). Removing a child from a home will likely protect the child from further abuse (Henderson, 2013); however, it cannot be guaranteed that a child taken from an abusive situation will be placed in a better environment (Kapoor & Zonana, 2010). However, PSCs must leave investigation and protection to the appropriate authorities. Relatedly, there is a lack of confidence in the system that is designed to protect children in CSA situations. PSCs need to allow case workers to do their job, rather than risk the continued abuse of a child.

PSCs considered the effectiveness of CPS to be a somewhat important influence in one's decision to not report. PSCs who elected not to report suspected cases of CSA

were consistent in the belief that CPS would be ineffective in implementing an intervention. This finding is consistent with research that suggests mandated reporters lack confidence in CPS to respond effectively to a mandated report and this distrust has an impact on one's decision to report (Bryant, 2009; Bryant & Baldwin, 2010; Crenshaw et al., 1995; King et al., 1998; Zellman & Faller, 1996). This lack of confidence in CPS could be directly related to the high rate of unsubstantiated child abuse dispositions calling into question the child protection system (King & Scott, 2014). National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System research for 2016 (as cited in USDHHS, 2018) indicated that the majority of children investigated were either determined to not have been victims of abuse or have received unsubstantiated dispositions based on lack of sufficient evidence according to the laws of the state in which the child resided. Although school professionals make the majority of mandated reports in the United States (USDHHS, 2018), dispositions determined by CPS are much more likely to be found unsubstantiated in comparison to mandated reporters in other fields (King & Scott, 2014). The high unsubstantiated disposition rate may be because school professionals receive maltreatment statements directly from children whose disclosures are sometimes viewed as less credible than adults (King & Scott, 2014). PSCs need to build better relationships with CPS (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010) in order to see that the protection of the abused child is considered before all else.

Another important factor considered by PSCs in not reporting suspected CSA was the belief that it was better to work through the issue with the family first. There are a number of risks involved with this practice. Some mandated reporters consider themselves better trained and capable of providing therapeutic interventions than CPS

and, therefore, elect to do so (King et al., 1998; Zellman & Faller, 1996). PSCs often do not have the time or extensive training to provide ongoing family therapy to a family where CSA is occurring. The belief that a family will “work through” such a complex issue with little intervention is a myth and should not be considered a viable option. Other mandated reporters may fear the negative impact of the therapeutic relationship with the child once a report of suspected abuse is made (Kapoor & Zonana, 2010). Additionally, in smaller communities, a mandated report could quickly become public knowledge (Henderson, 2013) leaving a family system in permanent turmoil (Bean, Softas-Nall, & Mahoney, 2011) and traumatizing a child even more. PSCs have to consider their legal obligation as a mandated reporter and their ethical obligation to the student, both of which are intended to protect the child above all else. Involving the student in the process of mandated reporting will best maintain the therapeutic relationship.

### **Limitations of the Study and Future Research**

There are several limitations that should be noted in this study. CSA cases are typically considered to be less ambiguous than other types of abuse cases, therefore increasing the likelihood of being appropriately reported (Bunting et al., 2010). The PSCs in this study were very effective in accurately recognizing and appropriately reporting CSA which yielded a lack of variability and power to identify statistical significance.

Another important consideration is that the answers to the self-reported case studies were anonymous, which may not be the case in the actual practice of filing a mandated report. Furthermore, the case studies that were provided may have elicited

less intense feelings than working directly with an abused child as part of an actual counselor-client experience. For example, there were no sexually abused children physically present, highly charged emotions were not as likely, and there were no chances of ramifications for making a report, thus leaving no concern for consequences.

In consideration of the above limitations, there are several recommendations for future research that should be noted at the conclusion of this study. Future studies should consider constructing more ambiguous vignettes or examine actual situations of suspected CSA. Additionally, future studies may also wish to investigate other components of Rest's (1986) theory of moral behavior, such as ego strength, in predicting PSCs recognition and appropriate reporting of CSA.

### **Conclusion**

Principled moral reasoning, training, and professional experience of PSCs did not predict their recognition and appropriate reporting of CSA. Likewise, commitment to and understanding of the mandated reporter role, confidence in CPS, and concern about the consequences of mandated reports were not predictors of PSCs' accurate recognition and appropriate reporting of CSA. PSCs who demonstrated a higher commitment to their mandated reporting responsibility shared lower levels of concern regarding potential negative consequences of reporting. They also shared generally negative attitudes about the effectiveness of CPS to intervene. PSCs who demonstrated more negative attitudes about CPS also shared greater concerns about potentially unwanted negative outcomes of mandated reporting. PSCs who held less concern regarding the negative consequences of reporting CSA were those who were more experienced in their careers and who had attended mandated reporter training in the last year. Leading

reasons regarding why PSCs purposely did not report suspected CSA included a belief that there was not sufficient evidence for reporting, that reporting would cause the child more harm than good, that CPS would be ineffective in implementing an intervention, and that it could have been more beneficial to work through the issue with the family as an alternative.

Based on the role of the PSC, it is likely that all PSCs will experience suspected abuse and act as a mandated reporter during the course of one's career. In addition, nearly all PSCs will have both positive and negative experiences with the process of mandated reporting (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010). These experiences may potentially influence the individuals' personal opinions about mandated reporting which may deviate from legal, moral, and ethical best practices. The concept of mandated reporting should present a universal standard in which personal beliefs should not impact one's decision to report (Behun et al., 2015) and thus deviations should not occur. However, this article shows that even though the majority of PSCs accurately recognize and appropriately report suspected CSA, there are times when PSCs elect not to report. The most significant function of mandated reporting laws is the protection of children and there should never be a time when a PSC suspects child abuse and purposely does not make the mandated report.

In conclusion, the knowledge and skills of PSCs in their accurate recognition of suspected abuse have received much attention over the past several years. As PSCs continue to receive training during their graduate level work and in-service trainings once they begin their careers, training must include the component of self-awareness which will only improve the appropriate reporting of CSA. By increasing PSCs'

awareness of personal and professional influences on mandated reporting practices, PSCs will further understand how such sensitive topics can have a personal impact on oneself. The ability for the PSC to increase self-awareness will only improve the safety and protection for all children for which they are responsible.

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