COUNSELING ADDICTION IN RURAL ALASKA AGAINST THE ODDS:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Heather J. Cromwell, Ph.D.
Kelley Conrad, Ph.D.
This presentation is dedicated to all individuals, teams and communities so diligently helping fight the disease of addiction.
Dr. Cromwell:
• Behavioral health clinician working/living in southeast Alaska for 4 years.
• Recovering alcoholic with 11 years sobriety
• Has worked in the addictions field in rural Oregon and rural Alaska
• Completed Ph.D. in Industrial-Organizational Psychology in July 2020.
Not enough D&A counselors exist to treat the addicted population (HHS, 2016)

Drug and alcohol abuse and addictions continue to rise (HHS, 2016; Skillman et al., 2016).
Where are the counselors?

**Counselor turnover**
- Burnout
- Insufficient staffing
- Job dissatisfaction
- Poor person-job fit
- Unsupportive onboarding
- Unrealistic expectations

(Eby, Burk, & Maher, 2010; Knight, Becan, & Flynn, 2012; Knudsen, Ducharme, & Roman, 2007; Laschober & de Tormes Eby, 2013; Young, 2015)

**Challenges of the profession**
- Low pay
- Stigma
- Vicarious trauma
- Relapse of their own
- Poor supervision
- Limited funding
- Lack of training and resources
- Healthcare reform
- Documentation

(Clarke, 2014; HHS, 2016; Weddington, 2016)
Add **rurality** to the list of professional challenges...

- Cultural differences and barriers
- Historical trauma
- Transportation
- Lack of resources/treatment facilities
- Scheduling difficulties

(Chipp et al., 2011; Roche et al., 2013)
No identified working solution to increase the D&A counselor populace.

Not enough research to identify the issue underlying counselor recruitment and retention.

The work requires skilled professionals (HHS, 2016)

Healthcare reform broadens treatment options/funding, but the skilled workforce is deficient (HHS, 2016; Skillman et al., 2016).

Need qualitative research to understand the counselors’ perspectives and motivation.
The Study

• Research gap included a “why” question determining why counselors do the work and why they continue doing the work.

• Desired information was for lived experience and meaning behind a phenomenon.

• Information could not be better answered by quantitative means.
Why phenomenology?

• Qualitative design
• Needed information regarding human experience of a phenomenon (van Manen, 2016)
• Wanted to discover first-hand experiences of participants (Husserl, 1964; Moustakas, 1994)
• Wanted richer understanding of the phenomenon
• No existing qualitative or phenomenological studies
Discover the lived experience and essence of being a D&A counselor in rural Alaska.

### Purpose Statement

**Qualitative** (interpretive, naturalistic approach)
- Answers a question of “why?”

**Hermeneutic** (interpretation)
- Interprets meaning in the words and responses

**Phenomenological** (lived experience)
- Discovers the essence of lived experience

### Method & Design

- **Qualitative** (interpretive, naturalistic approach)
- **Hermeneutic** (interpretation)
- **Phenomenological** (lived experience)

### Population & Sample

- 10 Participants
- Purposively sampled (Gentles et al., 2015; Valerio et al., 2016) based on specific criteria
- At least 5 years D&A counseling experience
- At least 2 years D&A counseling in rural Alaska
- 22-55 years old

*RUCC criteria (USDA, 2013)
What is your experience of being a drug and alcohol counselor in rural Alaska?

Why do you continue to do the work in the face of so many challenges?
## Why persist? From where is the motivation?

| **Self-determination theory**  
| (Ryan & Deci, 2017)  
| Desire to fulfill basic psychological needs of:  
| • Autonomy  
| • Competency  
| • Relatedness |
| **Prosocial motivation theory**  
| (Grant, 2008)  
| Sense of fulfillment comes from:  
| • Helping others |
| **Conceptual framework**  
| (Cromwell, 2020)  
| Incentive is a catalyst for human intention  
| • Incentive is positive well-being  
| • Achieve outcome through self-oriented behaviors and/or other-oriented behaviors  
| • Performance continues due to achieving positive sense of well-being |
Instrumentation and Data Collection Approach

- SurveyMonkey® questionnaire
- Semi-structured interview process with open-ended questions (Giorgi, 2009; Merriam, 2009; van Manen, 2016).
- Phone-recorded interviews transcribed for thematic analysis.
Data Analysis

• Clustered, analyzed and assessed themes in the transcripts (Giorgi, 2009; Merriam, 2009; van Manen, 2016).

• Phenomenological approach preserved experiences (Giorgi, 2009; Husserl, 1964; Moustakas, 1994).

• Interpreting the text of the interviews created dialogue (van Manen, 2016)

• Theoretical frameworks provided guidance (Grant, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2017)
Findings

- 5 themes – community, challenges, personal & professional growth, and prevention.
- Challenges were not the first theme.
- Overall sense of compassion and motivation to help communities.
- Wanted to talk and share stories.
- Unsure how to answer the question as it had never been asked.
Theme 1: Community

Giving Back
• Raised in the community
• Respect for Alaskan Native population
• As a “thank you” for having received the same help

Making a Difference
• Being helpful in the community
• Someone who is “safe” and trusted as a part of the community
• Giving youth a chance at sobriety
• Serving people in their own community
Theme 2: Challenges

- Small communities: Double-edged sword
- Lack of:
  - Treatment resources
  - Training and resources for training
  - Qualified personnel
- Rurality of villages and state
- Unrealistic documentation expectations
- Historical trauma
- Relapse
Themes 3 & 4: Growth and Development

PERSONAL (3)
• Building compassion and empathy
• Something bigger than oneself
• Saving lives

PROFESSIONAL (4)
• Certifications/degrees/training paid by agency
• Learn more than just the assigned job
• Can move within the agency when burnout occurs
Theme 5: Prevention

• Learning about and teaching the communities about their own historical trauma and the role addiction plays.

• Building resources within the community (e.g., peer supports recovery groups).

• Breaking the preexisting cycle of abuse and trauma.

• Being the positive role model.
MOTIVATION AND D&A COUNSELORS

- Combination of other-oriented (PMT) and self-oriented (SDT) (De Dreu & Nauta, 2009; Grant, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

- Not simply motivated by internal or external and one theoretical foundation does not seem to fit (e.g., SDT or PMT)

- Motivated by a sense of improved well-being, felt by helper and recipient – Reinforces the work (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010)

- Elements of “other-orientation” (helping others, saving lives, doing whatever the job takes) and “self-interest” reasons (education, growth, location, community support) (De Dreu & Nauta, 2009)
# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Investigate</td>
<td>Find out the source(s) of existing counselor motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine</td>
<td>Determine how best to support counselors based on their feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Continue to work to find funding for training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP, con’t

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collaborate</th>
<th>Collaborate with community partners to close gaps in treatment levels/availability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create</td>
<td>Create a pipeline for recruitment based on personal contacts of existing workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build</td>
<td>Build talent pool from within the community:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Support existing workers in areas of self care, possibly collaborating with community partners, elders, businesses, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FUTURE RESEARCH

• Mixed methods studies on motivation and D&A counselors
• Recruitment and retention in rural areas (longitudinal study)
• Identify successful fit/placement in communities
• Other incentives that mitigate identified challenges
• Realistic workforce development plans
Conclusions

- Motivation trumps challenges.
- More than one type of motivation is present.
- More qualitative and mixed methods research is needed.
- Those doing the work can contribute to the solutions.
THANK YOU


References, con’t


References, con’t


Weddington, S. (2016). *The role of social support in understanding the relationships of secondary traumatic stress and compassion satisfaction on volunteer intentions to quit* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Nebraska at Omaha).