Sibling Abuse: A Study of School Counselors' Shared Attitudes and Beliefs

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The impact of sibling abuse on children and adolescents is rarely contemplated. Counselors are in a position to advocate for all children and protect them from harm; yet one source of harm that counseling practitioners and educators might be unaware of stems from violence between siblings, which can become abusive. In this article, findings are presented from a phenomenological study examining eight practicing school counselors' attitudes and beliefs about sibling abuse and the contexts or situations that have influenced them. Seven themes emerged supporting school counselors' perceptions of their role in responding to sibling abuse and their beliefs about factors contributing to sibling abuse. Recommendations for advocacy for children and adolescents are offered for counselor educators, counselors-in-training and counseling practitioners, school counselors in particular.

Keywords: **sibling abuse, school counselors, advocacy, children, adolescents**

All counselors advocate for their clients (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; Ratts & Hutchins, 2009). School counselors, in particular, often perform a fundamental role in advocating for the well-being of children and adolescents (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). A unique aspect of practice for school counselors is that they work with children and adolescents on a daily basis and often over a longer period of time than other counselors in the community. School counselors' close proximity to children and adolescents within the school system also allows them to advocate for students systematically year after year.

One important way that school counselors can advocate for students is by protecting them from harm. In accordance with the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (Children's Bureau, 2010), the ASCA Ethical Standards (2010) and the ACA Code of Ethics (2014), school counselors must report any suspicion of child abuse or neglect to child protective service (CPS) agencies. School counselors often receive training on abuse recognition and reporting (Alvarez, Donohue, Kenny, Cavanagh, & Romero, 2005; Kominkiewicz, 2004; Lambie, 2005; Minard, 1993). However, child abuse training is typically exclusively focused on parent-to-child abuse or abuse by another adult over the age of 18.

Abuse of children by adults may not be as prevalent as other forms of abuse against children. A less commonly explored form of family violence is sibling abuse. In the past, sibling abuse was considered a normal rite of passage that most children experience and was misidentified as sibling rivalry (Phillips, Phillips, Grupp, & Trigg, 2009). However, results from National Family Violence

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Surveys indicated that violence between siblings was extensive and harmful (as cited in Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Wiehe (2002) summarized that participants in these surveys revealed the rates of sibling abuse "make the high rates of other forms of family violence, such as parents abusing children or spouses abusing each other, seem modest by comparison" (p. 2). In addition to potentially being the most prevalent form of abuse, it also has been determined that violence between siblings was the least reported and researched form of family abuse (Eriksen & Jensen, 2006, 2009). Stutey (2013) posited that a lack of federal laws and protocol for reporting sibling abuse, as well as the absence of a definition for sibling abuse in the school counseling literature, might contribute to this problem.

For this study, the term *sibling aggression* was utilized to represent a continuum of behaviors beginning with mild aggression (i.e., competition and conflict) and progressing to severe aggression (i.e., violence and abuse; Caspi, 2012). Sibling abuse and sibling violence were both viewed as severe forms of sibling aggression, with sibling abuse being the most severe. Sibling abuse has been defined as the unilateral physical, emotional or sexual harm of one sibling by another (Caspi, 2012). Researchers have suggested that 3–6% of children have experienced severe sibling abuse that might include using weapons or objects to inflict pain (Button & Gealt, 2010.

Sibling violence also has been considered a severe form of sibling aggression resulting in physical, emotional or sexual harm, but differs from sibling abuse because it is defined as bidirectional, or mutual, aggression between siblings (Caspi, 2012). The literature on sibling violence posits that 30–80% of children experience some form of violence by a sibling (Button & Gealt, 2010). Whether a product of sibling abuse or sibling violence, both forms of aggression result in emotional and psychological consequences for children (Stutey, 2013). For the purpose of this research study, Kiselica and Morrill-Richards' (2007) definition of a sibling was utilized and was inclusive of the following: "biological siblings (share both parents), half-siblings (one parent in common), step-siblings (connected through marriage of parents), adoptive siblings, foster siblings (joined through a common guardian) or fictive siblings (may not be biologically related but are considered siblings)" (p. 149).

Even when school counselors are able to make the distinction between less severe sibling aggression and sibling violence or abuse, there might be some confusion about how to address this phenomenon. The federal laws and statutes discussed previously do not specifically address or protect against abuse between siblings. While the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (Children's Bureau, 2010) provided clear guidelines for school counselors on how and when to report suspected child abuse by an adult, the same cannot be said for abuse by a sibling. Counselors in the clinical setting are likely to encounter this same predicament.

A review of the literature revealed that although ongoing research has been conducted by practitioners in the field of family violence and the medical field, particularly nursing (Button & Gealt, 2010; Caffaro, 2011; Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998; Caspi, 2012; Eriksen & Jensen, 2006, 2009; Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod, 2006; Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, Hamby, & Kracke, 2009; Goodwin & Roscoe, 1990; Morrill & Bachman, 2013; Skinner & Kowalski, 2013; Straus et al., 1980; Tucker, Finkelhor, Turner, & Shattuck, 2013; Wiehe, 1997), none of the research appeared in any of the professional literature for counselors with the exception of Kiselica and Morrill-Richards (2007). In addition, while all counselors are ethically required to promote wellness and protect students from harm, there was no specific research in the counseling literature that addressed training for counselors on how to identify and intervene with children experiencing sibling abuse and violence.

The combination of possible normalizing attitudes toward sibling rivalry coupled with a lack of training and guidelines on identification and intervention is problematic. Furthermore, researchers have confirmed that survivors of childhood sibling abuse exhibit many long-term mental health concerns similar to those of children abused by an adult, such as depression, drug and alcohol abuse, low self-esteem, at-risk sexual behaviors, and continuing the cycle of violence in future relationships (Noland, Liller, McDermott, Coulter, & Seraphine, 2004; Oshri, Tubman, & Burnette, 2012; Simonelli, Mullis, Elliott, & Pierce, 2002; Tucker et al., 2013; Waite & Shewokis, 2012; Wiehe, 2002). A lack of awareness and professional training standards about sibling abuse might ultimately result in counselors not reporting this as abuse and lead to long-term psychological harm to children and adolescents.

The purpose of this study was to examine and gain further insight into and awareness of current school counselors' shared experiences with sibling abuse. Based on the review of the literature, it also was imperative to understand whether there might be exterior influences impacting school counselors' ability to work with students experiencing sibling abuse. The two overarching questions for this study were the following: (1) How do school counselors describe their attitudes and beliefs about sibling abuse? (2) What contexts or situations have influenced or affected school counselors' attitudes and beliefs about sibling abuse?

Methodology

According to Trusty (2011), "if little is known about a research area or target population, it is likely that a qualitative study would be needed first" (p. 262) before utilizing a quantitative approach. Thus, the researcher chose a qualitative design because no current studies have been conducted with school counselors about sibling abuse. Phenomenology was the most appropriate methodology because it is grounded in the paradigmatic assumption of constructivism and the belief that multiple realities exist and can be explored through in-depth descriptions of participants' perspectives and lived experiences (Hays & Wood, 2011). Phenomenology was utilized as information was gathered and described, and meaning was interpreted from the data in order to better understand school counselors' shared attitudes and beliefs about sibling abuse and its relevant contexts or situations.

Participants

This study utilized a purposeful sample of practicing school counselors across one Western state. By choosing a single state, the specific state laws and statutes in place to protect children from abuse and neglect were available to be thoroughly explored. In addition, each participant had at least 2 years of experience as a practicing school counselor. Soliciting school counselors with at least 2 years of experience increased the likelihood that the participants had experience working with children and abuse, and perhaps sibling abuse. Participants were solicited through local and regional professional organizations such as local school districts and the state school counseling association. To gain a balanced sample, participants were recruited at all three grade levels and from a variety of geographical locations and districts across one Western state.

The participants in this study consisted of eight female school counselors. Two of the participants self-identified as European and the remaining six self-identified as Caucasian. The age range of these participants was 35–58 years old with a mean age of 44 years old. Participants reported a range of 4–21 years of experience as school counselors with a mean of 10 years of experience. All participants except for one graduated from a CACREP-accredited master's degree counseling program between the years of 1989 and 2009. One participant later earned a PhD in higher education. Five of the

participants identified their schools as urban and three as suburban. At the time of participation, three participants worked at the elementary level, two at the middle school level and three at the high school level. A Graham Fund Grant was received to give participants a $25 gift card for their participation in this study.

Procedures

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, the researcher secured informed consent and conducted two audiotaped interviews with each participant, allowing 3–4 weeks between interviews. First interviews ranged from 45–60 minutes in length and second interviews ranged from 30–45 minutes in length. The second interview gave participants the opportunity to share any further insights once they had had time to reflect upon the phenomena of sibling abuse and allowed for prolonged engagement, which built trust with participants and created an opportunity to check for misinformation (Creswell, 2007).

When possible, it is recommended that in-person interviews be conducted in order to gain as much information as possible, both verbally and nonverbally (Creswell, 2007; Given, 2008). Based on their availability and comfort level, six of the first interviewees chose in-person interviews, one participant opted for a Skype interview and one was interviewed by telephone. In the second interviews, seven of the eight participants interviewed in person and one participant opted for a second telephone interview.

Story vignettes were created to be utilized alongside the first semistructured individual interview. Because sibling abuse is a relatively unknown topic, vignettes allowed participants to respond to hypothetical questions about sibling abuse. Hypothetical questions allowed participants to discuss what they might do in a particular situation (Merriam, 1998) and ensured that all participants would be able to share their attitudes and beliefs whether or not they had encountered a student experiencing sibling abuse. The researcher utilized Heverly, Fitt, and Newman's (1984) empirical model to create two story vignettes that varied on three factors: gender, age of the student, and the type of abuse being presented (physical and emotional or relational). "Vignettes are partial descriptions of life situations used in research and education as a strategy to elicit participants' attitudes, judgments, beliefs, knowledge, opinions or decisions" (Brauer et al., 2009, p. 1938). (Interview questions and story vignettes are available from the author.)

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

All data were collected by one researcher and transcribed by a third party. Data were analyzed and independently coded at two levels by the researcher. In the first level of coding, shorthand was assigned to data to identify important information about the data, and in the second level, interpretive constructs were identified (Merriam, 1998). Throughout both levels of coding, the specific techniques for analyzing phenomenological data of horizontalizing, clustering horizons, and textural and structural description were utilized (Moustakas, 1994).

Several techniques were used to ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of data collection and analysis. First, the researcher conducted two member checks. According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), a member check is the most important technique that researchers can use to establish credibility. Participants received transcripts from their individual interviews and initial emerging and final themes. Participants were allowed to remove or further discuss any data from their transcript or the initial and final themes that did not fit their perspective and experience of the phenomenon.

Next, the researcher utilized peer reviewers. Two peer reviewers provided feedback at three points throughout the data collection and analysis—after the first two individual interviews, at

the end of the first round of interviews and at the end of the second round of interviews. Peer reviewers had access to initial emerging themes and final themes, the researcher's journal, and coding documentation in order to inform their feedback provided to the researcher throughout the data collection and analysis process. The researcher conducted a debriefing session after receiving feedback from each of the peer reviewers. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended that peer debriefing sessions be documented. Therefore, the researcher tracked feedback and subsequent changes to emerging themes in a researcher's journal as part of an audit trail.

Finally, the researcher utilized bridling to establish trustworthiness and acknowledge prior and current experiences with sibling abuse. "Bridling is a reflexive project, is a departure from the often used phenomenological technique of *bracketing* one's pre-understandings, and offers ways to imagine a less deterministic view of validity in phenomenological research" (Vagle, 2009, p. 586, emphasis in original). Bridling was chosen over bracketing because the researcher had personal and professional experiences with sibling abuse making it unlikely, if not impossible, to put aside all biases and assumptions.

The researcher developed a researcher's stance and kept a researcher's journal throughout the data collection and analysis to bridle and manage biases and assumptions. A summary of the researcher's stance is provided below. Presentation of these assumptions and biases was an effort to increase awareness about what might inadvertently influence this study; it was not an attempt to change or dismiss assumptions or biases, but rather to bridle how these might impact the collection and analysis of the data.

Researcher's Stance
The researcher was interested in sibling abuse for several intertwined reasons. As a school counselor for 8 years, the researcher worked with many children and their siblings around issues that were commonly referred to as sibling rivalry. However, the researcher received no training or academic coursework about sibling abuse and in retrospect acknowledged that sibling abuse or violence may have been overlooked with several students. In addition, the researcher is the middle child of five siblings and experienced mild sibling aggression beyond developmentally appropriate sibling rivalry. The researcher acknowledged that these professional and personal experiences furthered an interest to learn more about sibling abuse. The researcher engaged in ongoing reflexivity and continued to engage in bridling professional and personal experiences with sibling abuse throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Results

A total of seven themes emerged from the two interviews with the participants. The seven themes, as well as corresponding subthemes, have been organized into two overarching categories: (a) responding to sibling abuse, and (b) factors contributing to sibling abuse (see Figure 1). The first category represented participants' perception of their role as school counselors to respond to students experiencing sibling abuse and ways in which to support families. The overarching category of responding to sibling abuse was supported by the following four themes: keeping students safe, defining the line, multiple victims and needs, and education and awareness. The second overarching category represented what participants perceived as contributing factors that might influence and impact how they viewed and responded to students experiencing sibling abuse. The second overarching category, factors contributing to sibling abuse, was supported by the following four themes: education and awareness, sibling bond, learned violence, and systemic barriers. It was determined that one of the seven themes (education and awareness) overlapped and fit into

both of the overarching categories. Descriptions of the themes and accompanying subthemes are provided with support from participants. Participants chose pseudonyms to be used throughout their participation in this research study.

Responding to Sibling Abuse

   Keeping students safe. The first theme that emerged from the participant data was *keeping students safe.* This theme was defined as participants' shared beliefs that as school counselors, they are responsible to respond and to advocate on behalf of all students in order to keep them safe from psychological harm. Participants shared that abuse by a sibling was "no different" than a parent abusing a child. However, only one of the eight participants shared that she had responded to sibling abuse by following specific district protocol outlining how school counselors should report sibling abuse. Of the remaining seven participants, four had encountered one or more instances of sibling abuse at their school and responded in a variety of ways to keep students safe. The remaining three participants hypothesized what they might do if sibling abuse was suspected, but reported that they had never directly spoken to a student about sibling abuse. Two subthemes emerged from the participants' descriptions of keeping students safe—advocacy and collaboration.

   Advocacy. First, participants shared that they perceived their role as being responsible for keeping students safe by responding through advocacy. For example, Grace shared, "My number-one role is to advocate for students and make sure that they are safe." Laura stated, "I just think before we can do much of anything else, we have to keep them safe—so that is very important." She mentioned that for some children, "school is the safe place that they have to go." Many participants stated that one of the key ways in which they would advocate for children experiencing any kind of abuse, including sibling, was by contacting CPS or law enforcement. Margaret shared, "I think you definitely need to notify law enforcement that it [sibling abuse] is something that is happening in the home and then make a call to social services as well."

   Collaboration. While participants endorsed that one way to keep students safe is to advocate and report sibling abuse to CPS agencies or local law enforcement authorities, they acknowledged that these strategies do not always stop the problem. Therefore, to keep students safe, participants shared that they also believed they needed to collaborate with parents and outside agencies to put support systems in place for the victim, offender and family. Valerie shared, "I feel like my best shot is to talk to the parents to see if there is something they can do to protect the child at home." Tiffany noted, "If I can get the family on board, then hopefully we can get a lot more done." At the same time, participants discussed that collaborating with parents can be problematic, especially if there is a history of family violence or parents dismiss sibling abuse as a serious problem. Ty mentioned, "I can help with the [sibling] competition and I can help with the conflict, but the violence and abuse are much too severe for a casual relationship—they need longer term help." Therefore, beyond collaborating with parents, participants shared that to keep students safe from sibling violence and abuse, they also may need to solicit help from community-based counselors.

   Defining the line. The second theme that emerged from the participant data was *defining the line.* This theme was defined as participants' shared attitudes and beliefs about how they delineated between healthy sibling rivalry and sibling violence or abuse. Participants endorsed that sibling abuse or violence was often viewed as "normal" in society, making it more difficult to identify and therefore report. Also, participants shared that students and parents may not differentiate harmful sibling aggression from healthy rivalry, and therefore students are likely being harmed. Although participants believed it was their role to respond to students, they shared that sibling abuse is difficult

to define and consequently report, which makes it a complex problem. The following two subthemes emerged from the participants' descriptions of defining the line: normal sibling rivalry, and violence and abuse.

   Normal sibling rivalry. First, the counselors discussed normal sibling rivalry as healthy and a "normal part of growing up," which presented opportunities for school counselors to respond through lessons on conflict resolution. Lee shared, "I believe in competition, I believe in conflict over the biggest cookie or bathroom time, TV time or choosing different things. . . . I think that is all
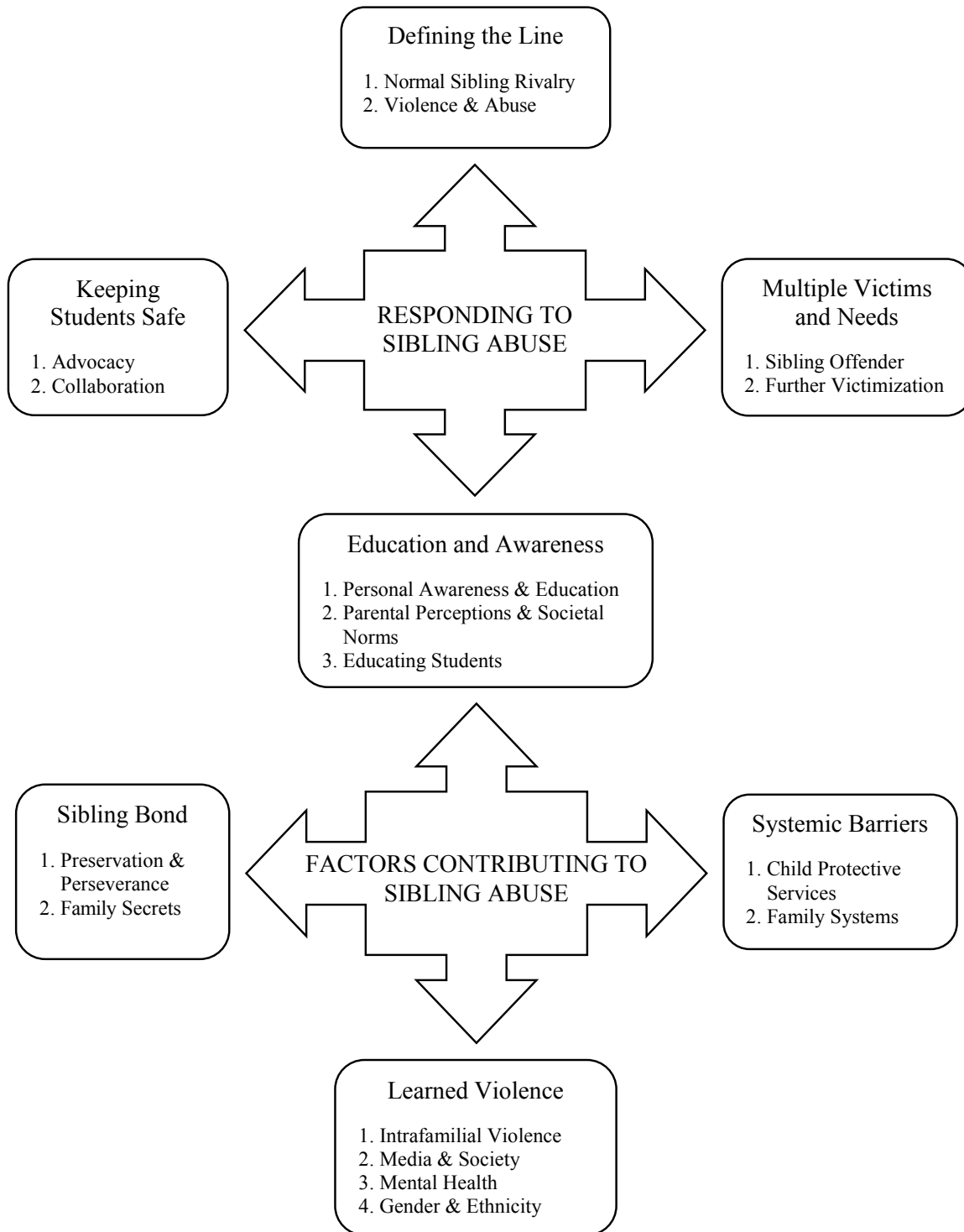

Figure 1. Themes Related to Sibling Abuse

natural and normal and healthy, and it helps us figure out life." Holly shared, "In conflict, you learn a lot about how to resolve conflict with your siblings and it is normal to have conflict, especially minor conflict." Participants shared that absence of a firm definition for where to "draw this line" between sibling rivalry and violence or abuse often negatively affected the ways in which they responded.

Violence and abuse. Participants shared varying views on what differentiated sibling violence from abuse; however, most shared that sibling violence was a mutual act between siblings while abuse consisted of a power differential between siblings. Valerie stated, "Abuse is when one of them who is bigger, meaner, tougher, beats up the other one, and the other one can't defend themselves." She further explained, "When it's violent, they can each give and take, but when it's abusive, one of them can't protect themselves or dish out as much as they get." Participants struggled to define how often a behavior had to occur for it to be considered abuse. Tiffany asked, "Do they have to get punched in the face three times, does that make it abuse? So it's just a weird line. Is there a line? I really don't know." Grace mentioned the need for "a clear definition for school counselors and maybe examples and how to go about addressing it."

Multiple victims and needs. The third theme that emerged from the participant data was *multiple victims and needs*. This theme was defined as participants' shared attitudes and beliefs about responding not only to the primary victim of sibling abuse, but also responding to others such as the sibling offender or other victims. Participants believed that school counselors focus primarily on working with the student being harmed in cases of child abuse. However, participants felt equal responsibility for the sibling offender's well-being and academic success as they did for the victim's. Participants who had worked with sibling offenders in the schools noted concern that these students might also be "victim[s] of abuse themselves." The following two subthemes emerged from the participants' descriptions of multiple victims and needs: sibling offender and further victimization.

Sibling offender. Beyond responding to the sibling victim, participants also were concerned with responding to the needs of the sibling offender. Participants shared that there may be multiple victims of abuse, and all family mental health needs must be addressed. As school counselors, they "would be concerned on both ends" for the mental health needs and potential victimization of students who were both the victim and the offender of sibling abuse. Holly stated, "I assume if they [the sibling offender] are picking on this person, we are going to find out they are victims." Margaret shared, "Whoever the perpetrator is, is struggling with something, either a mental illness or they were bullied or a victim of abuse themselves." Grace described, "I would be fearful that that is coming from somewhere else, like violence between each other."

Further victimization. Participants described their shared attitudes and beliefs that responding to sibling abuse without considering the needs of the sibling offender may result in the potential for further victimization, due to what participants described as a "trickle-down" effect. Ty stated, "You always pick on the next person down in the pecking order. It makes a lot of sense that she would go home and pick on the next one down." Holly shared, "In reality, the perpetrators don't think they did anything wrong and haven't addressed it and worked through it." Participants perceived that without intervention, sibling offenders might continue to victimize others and specifically mentioned cousins and peers as potential targets.

Education and awareness. The fourth theme that emerged from the participant data was *education and awareness.* This theme was defined as participants' shared attitudes and beliefs that an overall lack of awareness and education around the topic of sibling abuse has negatively influenced school counselors' ability to respond to students. Participants shared that sibling abuse "does not come up

a lot" and that there is an attitude of either "obliviousness or acceptance" around the topic of sibling abuse. In addition, this theme of education and awareness was further described as a potential contributing factor to the high rates of sibling abuse that might go unaddressed or unreported due to a lack of awareness or education. Based on these findings, this theme has been placed in both overarching categories. Three subthemes emerged from the participants' descriptions of education and awareness—personal awareness and education, parental perceptions and societal norms, and educating students.

Personal awareness and education. For many participants, this study was the first time they had thought about sibling abuse, and all counselors shared that they had little to no training or education in this area. Lee shared, "It has been eye-opening to me to consider it because I have never given it any thought prior to this, so that in and of itself has been huge." Margaret also mentioned being more aware after participating in this study, saying, "It is definitely something that is on my radar. . . . I am almost embarrassed to be naïve, but it never came up before." Grace described, "It is something that I will look for more now when working with youth because I don't think it was something that I thought much about before talking with you."

Parental perceptions and societal norms. Participants shared perceptions about students' home lives and attributed the lack of awareness or education on the part of parents as a factor contributing to sibling abuse. Holly shared, "I think a lot of parents and other adults just think it is normal." She further stated, "I don't think they recognize when it goes too far. . . . I think it is awful to have a bully in the house that you are stuck with, and they should do everything they can to intervene." Laura emphasized school counselors should be "focusing a lot on parenting skills and how we can help parents to learn things that would help."

Educating students. Participants perceived that it is the school counselor's role to educate students and provide them with support. Valerie stated that when it comes to sibling abuse, "Kids maybe have this misperception that 'I should be able to handle this.'" Ty noted, "They [students] don't even know they need help because it's been going on so long. . . . It still makes me sad that most kids don't realize it oftentimes until it is too late, and there will be permanent scars from it." Laura added, "They don't have an easy way to fix it or don't know what to do if the sibling is a lot bigger and has a lot more power; naturally then you are kind of stuck."

Factors Contributing to Sibling Abuse
Sibling bond. The fifth theme that emerged from the participant data was *sibling bond.* This theme was defined as participants' shared attitudes and beliefs about the importance of the sibling relationship and bond that exists between brothers and sisters. Participants noted the "powerfulness" of this sibling bond, which they believed might create an attachment as important as, or more important than, other family or peer relationships. Many participants discussed the influence of their own sibling relationships and shared that they thought "fondly" of their siblings and that therefore the sibling relationship should be "cherished and preserved at all costs." School counselors' belief that the sibling relationship should be preserved no matter what might interfere with their ability to recognize sibling abuse with students and therefore contribute to the problem. On the other hand, participants noted that this sibling bond also could create a sense of unhealthy "family loyalty," which might lead to siblings becoming protective of one another to a fault. This protectiveness might contribute to the continuation of sibling abuse or violence due to fear that their "family is going to get torn apart" if reported. Two subthemes emerged from the participants' descriptions of the sibling bond—preservation and perseverance, and family secrets.

Preservation and perseverance. Many participants emphasized the importance of the sibling relationship within childhood development. Tiffany shared, "I think sibling relationships really define how people look at themselves and each other in the world, whether they realize it or not. . . . That is really how you have your first disagreements, your first shaming, your first happy moments." Valerie shared, "I truly believe that the sibling relationships are powerful and they need to be cherished and preserved at all costs or improved." Participants' beliefs about the importance of preserving the sibling relationship influenced how they interacted with students, leading them to stress the importance of persevering when experiencing difficulty with a sibling. Ty mentioned that she had told students, "Right now you might be enemies, but you might be best friends when you are 22."

Family secrets. This subtheme related to participants' perceptions about the strength of the sibling bond and how students might be keeping family secrets. Lee shared, "I think people don't want to 'dis' their family. . . . Kids are reluctant to throw family members under the bus." Ty stated that students are fearful of what might happen if they were to report. "They try to hide it so much. . . . I think there are all these rumors out there—'I'm going to lose my family and I don't want to be put in a foster home.'" Tiffany stated, "It really isn't talked about; it is just lumped into 'Oh, if anybody hurts you—but because it's family it's that loyalty piece and you can't say anything.'"

Learned violence. The sixth theme that emerged from the participant data was *learned violence.* This theme was defined as participants' shared attitudes and beliefs about the ways in which children or adolescents might have come to learn that violence or abuse against a sibling is accepted or tolerated. The counselors shared that children often "do what they see" and that they "are so used to violence." Participants concluded that sibling abuse was something students have learned from a variety of avenues contributing to the phenomenon. Four subthemes emerged from the participants' descriptions of *learned violence*—intrafamilial violence, media and society, mental health, and gender and ethnicity.

Intrafamilial violence. Other forms of violence within the home (parental, domestic) might support an environment where violence is learned, making it acceptable for siblings to be violent to one another. Grace questioned, "Is it because they have learned it from a parent or an aunt or an uncle or a grandparent?" Valerie shared, "Kids typically do what they see, what they are exposed to or what they experience. Either they are experiencing abuse or they see domestic violence." Lee added, "In our population we are seeing more aggression and assertiveness in our parents, between parents, and when I think about the kids who have that tendency, that is what they are living with."

Media and society. Participants discussed that media and society portray violence as acceptable and that this permissiveness might influence children to be violent or abusive to their siblings. Laura shared, "I don't know if it is the stress of what they are seeing and also the video games and other media that they have access to. Too often it's not appropriate, so I think that can play a part, too." Valerie shared, "They are exposed to video games, movies where aggression and violence is . . . acceptable human behavior." Ty added, "We are so used to violence right now that wrestling or punching or slapping, we just say, 'Oh, buck up, that wasn't that big of a deal.' A decade before we'd say, 'That is not appropriate, that is not okay.'"

Mental health. Participants shared their perceptions that mental health needs or problems might contribute to sibling violence and abuse. One participant postulated that sibling offenders might be dealing with mental health issues in which they are more prone to anger. Grace shared, "I think it is something already within the kid. Are they born already with something inside of them?" Valerie

stated, "I think it is possible that the kiddo that is doing most of the abuse has mental health problems like severe anxiety, depression or oppositional defiant disorder." Margaret shared that children and adolescents might learn that violence is acceptable and carry this belief into relationships with their siblings. "There are underlying issues whether it be in the family or in the individual, whether it is depression or mental illness."

Gender and ethnicity. Participants discussed in particular about how female students have learned that violence is acceptable. Ty noted that she worked with a diverse population of students from many different countries. She stated, "In many, many countries you can do what you want with women." She posited that students learn about gender roles at home, saying, "Dad's treating Mom that way; why shouldn't I? I've been told not to put up [with] anything from a female." Participants also observed that within certain ethnic groups, the acceptance of family violence varies. For example, Margaret worked at a school with many Asian students and noted that when it comes to discipline, "It has been interesting to learn cultural exceptions that it's okay to hit their kids." Ty mentioned, "Females in certain cultures . . . Hispanic [students] especially . . . I think they put up with a lot of crap and they don't realize their worth. So I think they think they are open to being abused."

Systemic barriers. The seventh theme that emerged from the participant data was *systemic barriers*. This theme was defined as participants' shared attitudes and beliefs about the systems that school counselors encounter as barriers to advocating for students experiencing sibling abuse. Although participants understood that it is their role to work with a variety of systems, such as CPS, law enforcement and families, they shared frustrations that there is "no follow-up" or that sibling abuse is "swept under the rug." Participants reflected on the power dynamics that exist and the helplessness that they (as school counselors), the victim and even parents may experience due to systemic barriers. Many questioned who is responsible to respond and whether reports about sibling abuse would be taken seriously. Participants shared that the barriers they encounter in trying to get help for students experiencing maltreatment often contribute to the cycle of abuse. Although only three participants in this study had direct experience reporting sibling abuse in particular, all eight participants endorsed this theme and shared their attitudes and beliefs on trying to report abuse in general. The following two subthemes emerged from the participants' descriptions of the systemic barriers: CPS and family systems.

Child protective services. Participants discussed the barriers in working with the CPS systems and other resources such as law enforcement. One of the barriers that participants repeatedly mentioned was little follow-up in helping students. Ty shared her frustration that representatives from social services would respond by saying, "We don't have enough proof." Margaret stated, "I have had one this week and one in the past where siblings have come to school with bruises from siblings. I did report it and the follow-up has not been really good from the social services agency." Other participants shared that it was unclear whom they should be reporting sibling abuse to, and even social services and law enforcement seemed confused at times. Tiffany mentioned, "It gets passed off—'Oh, well, it's student to student; that's a police thing'—sometimes the police don't take it as seriously because it's a family thing—'Oh, well, contact the family'—and then it's left in the family's hands."

Family systems. Related to this lack of clarity when reporting sibling abuse, participants also shared the difficulty they have encountered as school counselors when working with families to intervene for students experiencing sibling abuse. Lee stated, "If they can't handle it themselves, they don't want to reach out and ask for help or tell anybody because then the façade would be

broken. I think that is maybe why it continues." Many participants commented on how powerless children must feel to live in a home where parents allow sibling abuse to continue. Laura stated, "If the sibling is a lot bigger and has a lot more power, naturally then you are kind of stuck . . . no place to run to." Holly added, "I think it's very dangerous to have a sibling bully, abuser at home because you are trapped with them and often feel powerless to do something about that, and if parents aren't responsive to your reporting them you're just stuck."

Discussion

Participants in this study shared that while they believe sibling abuse is most likely occurring with students in their schools, it is not something they often knowingly encounter. These findings are consistent with previous conclusions that sibling abuse is often unrecognized and therefore unaddressed (Button & Gealt, 2010; Eriksen & Jensen, 2006, 2009; Wiehe, 2002). At the time of data collection, only three of the eight counselors had directly worked with a student experiencing sibling abuse. Even among those participants, it was noted that reporting sibling abuse to school counselors is a rare occurrence. Participants agreed that it is plausible that sibling abuse occurs much more often than students, parents and school counselors recognize or report.

Throughout several themes, participants discussed shared beliefs that there is a climate of acceptance when it comes to sibling abuse, which contributes to the phenomenon. Participants shared that many counselors, themselves included, might have difficulty defining the line between normal sibling rivalry and sibling abuse. It was not surprising to discover that participants struggled to define sibling abuse, given that sibling abuse is often considered to be synonymous or interchangeable with terms such as sibling maltreatment, aggression and rivalry (Stutey & Clemens, 2015; Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998; Caspi, 2012; Hamel, 2007; Kettrey & Emery, 2006; Wiehe, 2002). In addition, participants believed that in some families, sibling violence or abuse might be misconstrued and amplified because of the presence of intrafamilial abuse.

Participants discussed their shared attitudes and beliefs about a variety of specific factors that might contribute to the acceptance of violence with siblings. The counselors shared their beliefs that children and adolescents might learn that violence and abuse are acceptable through their experiences at home, in the media, and society. They noted that students who are exposed to intrafamilial violence in the home often learn that violence is permissible. Many authors have found that the presence of intrafamilial violence in the home may increase the prevalence of violence between siblings (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998; Caspi, 2012; Gelles & Cornell, 1985; Noland et al., 2004; Straus et al., 1980; Wallace, 2008; Wiehe, 2002).

Participants also shared a variety of attitudes related to their own feelings of powerlessness. Participants reported feeling frustrated when they encountered obstacles and barriers when trying to report sibling abuse or collaborate with parents and families. As previously discussed, school counselors are mandated child abuse reporters; yet this can be an ambiguous and challenging part of their job (Alvarez, Kenny, Donohue, & Carpin, 2004; Bae, Solomon, Gelles, & White, 2010; Bryant, 2009; Bryant & Baldwin, 2010; Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008; Remley & Fry, 1993). Given that resources to assist children being abused by adults may already be stretched thin, and that society tends to minimize the impact of sibling abuse, one can hypothesize that resources are even scarcer for victims of abuse by siblings. Participants shared feeling powerless to help students and posited concerns that students might also feel powerless.

Furthermore, participants discussed at length their concerns about not having received proper training to identify and intervene with students experiencing sibling abuse. Participants reported that a lack of preparation can be problematic in two ways. First, if they are unprepared as school counselors to recognize sibling abuse, this lack of preparation influences their ability to identify and address sibling abuse. Second, participants shared that if they are not informed, it is difficult to prepare their students, parents and faculty to recognize and report sibling abuse.

A final concept reiterated by participants was the influence of increased awareness about sibling abuse. As previously mentioned, sibling abuse is a topic seldom discussed or often excused as normal sibling rivalry (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998; Caspi, 2012; Eriksen & Jensen, 2009; Wiehe, 2002). Participants shared that involvement in this study increased their awareness about sibling abuse. Increased awareness, in turn, influenced participants' attitudes and beliefs about sibling abuse and the ways they plan to respond with students experiencing sibling abuse. By the end of the study, the counselors were inquisitive about ways they might increase the education and awareness of sibling abuse for others. School counselors working on behalf of and with students in the schools and at the public arena level are supported by both ASCA (2012) and the ACA advocacy competencies (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009).

Implications for Counseling

Several implications for counseling practice emerged based on the data provided by participants. First, the counselors emphasized the importance of providing training to increase education and awareness. Participants expressed how much they appreciated the story vignettes and Caspi's (2012) sibling aggression continuum, which were utilized in the semistructured interviews. They suggested utilizing story vignettes and the sibling aggression continuum for professional development on the topic of sibling abuse. Wiehe (1997, 2002) provided multiple real-life scenarios from adult survivors of emotional, physical and sexual sibling abuse that may be effective in training counselors to identify the various forms of sibling abuse. Furthermore, practitioners might be able to utilize these same resources to holistically educate the clients with whom they work about sibling abuse, and to promote wellness.

Next, participants confirmed that sibling abuse is not a topic on educators' radar. Encouraging and supporting collaboration between school counselors and other educators might provide opportunities for better awareness, identification and treatment of sibling abuse. Barrett, Lester, and Durham (2011) emphasized that school counselors are only one group of many responders advocating for children suffering from maltreatment in the school setting. They concluded that clinical mental health counselors, social workers, marriage and family therapists, and school psychologists should "all function as social justice advocates, especially in providing services to children who are underserved, disadvantaged, maltreated, or living in abusive situations" (Barrett et al., 2011, p. 87). Therefore, collaboration with other professionals within the school and community settings is one avenue that practicing school counselors might explore to ensure a holistic approach to promoting wellness and protecting children from harm.

Finally, while opportunities for training and collaboration with community resources are two implications for practice, participants also stressed the importance of establishing policies for reporting sibling abuse. One avenue that school counselors can use to respond to sibling abuse is social justice advocacy. Practicing school counselors and counselor educators may need to advocate for changes in district, state and federal laws and policies. The ACA has endorsed that all counselors

should meet advocacy competencies in their work with clients. Furthermore, "social justice is a key task of the 21st-century, professional school counselor" (Ratts et al., 2007, p. 90). Applying a social justice-inspired advocacy lens when working with students experiencing sibling abuse might allow school counselors to advocate at the individual, school and public arena levels.

Based on the findings of this research, the topic of social justice advocacy also has implications for counselor educators and supervisors. Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, and Bryant (2007) shared that education with master's students at the public arena level might require modifications to current curriculum, writing, "To prepare future counselors. . . to assume social justice roles, it is vital that the structure, requirements, and goals of many graduate training programs are modified to assist students in developing competencies to intervene at broader levels" (p. 27). Counselors-in-training must receive the proper education on their role and responsibility as practitioners and social justice-inspired advocates at all three levels.

Future Research

The results of this study present the need for future research about sibling abuse, especially within the school counseling field. First, research could be conducted to learn whether existing programs and trainings on child abuse might also be effective to work with students experiencing sibling abuse. Participants suggested that perhaps anti-bullying curricula that examine peer-to-peer violence also might be helpful in addressing sibling abuse. Second, research on effective ways to identify and respond to sibling abuse is imperative in order to inform practicing school counselors, and other counseling practitioners, on ways in which to intervene and treat sibling abuse in the school setting. In addition, studies on effective ways to identify and respond to sibling abuse could be replicated with clinical mental health and marriage, couple and family counselors working in community settings. Finally, there are opportunities for future research in the counselor education and supervision field. Insight into the education and awareness of counselor educators and their beliefs and attitudes about sibling abuse might be an initial point of entry. This research could be expanded to examine whether and how counselor educators train counselors—in particular, school counselors—on ways to define, identify and intervene with clients or students experiencing sibling abuse.

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