



Professional Burnout and Supervisor Support in ABA Therapists:

A Mixed Methods Design

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Rationale for Study

- The rise in the prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) over the last decade (CDC, 2015) has necessitated the development of behavioral therapy techniques to address the social, cognitive, and behavioral delays that are symptomatic of these disorders.
- Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is one of the most commonly used treatment programs, and interventionists are trained to use these techniques in a variety of therapy settings.
- However, the unique demands inherent to the job of ABA interventionist have led to high levels of job-stress and a higher than average job turnover rate (Hurt, Grist, Malesky, & McCord, 2013).



What is burnout?

- *Burnout* manifests as emotional and physical exhaustion in addition to feelings of frustration and withdrawal (Schuster, Nelson, & Quisling, 1984), which lead to job-related stress experiences.
- Broken into three aspects (Maslach et. al, 1997):
 - *Emotional Exhaustion*: As emotional resources are depleted, workers feel they are no longer able to give of themselves at a psychological level
 - *Depersonalization*: Negative, cynical attitudes and feelings about one's clients that can lead to acting callously
 - *Reduced Personal Accomplishment*: The tendency to evaluate oneself negatively, particularly in regard to their work with clients



Literature Review: Why study burnout?

- **McCarthy & Frieze, 1999**
 - A study of persons undergoing mental health therapy revealed correlations between maladaptive therapy and perceived levels of burnout
 - Theorized that experiences of the symptoms associated with burnout may lead therapists to choose maladaptive therapy strategies that could negatively impact client care
- **Linley and Joseph (2007)**
 - Conducted a study on the both positive and negative aspects of the well-being in 156 therapists in a variety of fields
 - Therapists with a behavioral orientation (e.g., ABA therapists) were less likely to report feelings of positive growth and change, but were significantly more likely than other therapists to report feelings of burnout



Literature Review: Burnout in mental health clinicians

- Morse et al. 2012
 - Between 21% and 67% of mental health workers may be experiencing feelings of burnout, affecting their emotional health, reduced commitment to their organization, high absenteeism, and high job turnover
- Rzeszutek & Schier, 2014
 - Severity of burnout was investigated in a sample of 200 cognitive-behavioral therapists in relation to temperament traits
 - Therapists who experienced severe burnout were noted to experience a severe lack of energy and a loss of commitment to their organization, but these factors were protected against by significant levels of perceived social support



Literature Review: Burnout in ABA clinicians

- **Hurt, Grist, Malesky, and McCord (2013)**
 - Found positive correlations between personality factors such as agreeableness with personal efficacy, mitigating the feelings of burnout
- **Hurt and colleagues (2013)**
 - Looked specifically at perceived supervisor support as a predictor of burnout in a group of ABA therapists
 - Conclude that supervisor support played a central role in predicting the burnout and self-efficacy levels of these therapists
- **Kazemi, Shapiro, Rylander (2015)**
 - Examined factors that contribute to turnover in a sample of 96 BTs across Southern California working with individuals with ASD
 - 38% of the sample reported they were highly or somewhat likely to leave their jobs based on satisfaction with training, supervision, pay, and different aspects of the job



Research Questions

- Do individuals who perceive a greater degree of supervisor support while on the job experience a significantly less severe degree of occupational burnout?
 - Hypothesis: Yes!
- How, specifically, can an individual's direct supervisor affect the interventionist's feelings of success while implementing ABA therapy?



Procedure: Overview

- A modified mixed-methods design implementing quantitative surveys and a qualitative interview-style question
- Interventionists contacted with a link to an online survey comprised of the individual measures + informed consent
- First administration: April-November 2016 in San Diego
Second administration: April-July 2017 in New Orleans



Method: Demographics

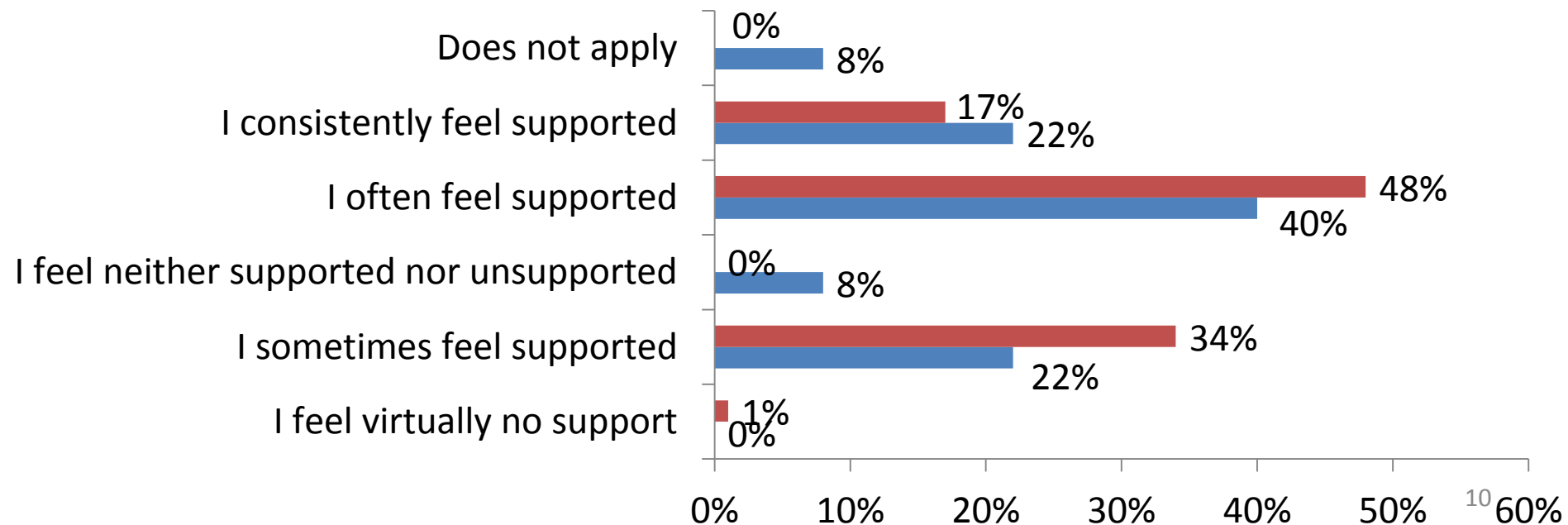
- Population Sample (NOLA)
 - Convenience sample of 50 individuals working with *Autism Spectrum Therapies* who had begun working in the field by January 2017
 - Interventionists trained to implement ABA therapy
 - All participants were over 18 years of age and had been active in the field with an assigned supervisor for a minimum of 90 days
- Demographics Summary
 - Average participant:
 - Female identified
 - 26-32 years of age
 - 1-3 years of experience with ABA
 - Working 1-on-1 in home, in schools, primarily in clinics
 - Encountered at least 3 types of maladaptive behaviors
 - Almost perfectly matches the average participant from the SD study



Method: Exploratory Questions

“If you work closely with family members (parents, caregivers, etc.) or teachers during your ABA sessions, please rank your overall perception of support these individuals show with regard to their interest in and practice of your implementation of ABA programs”

■ SD ■ NOLA

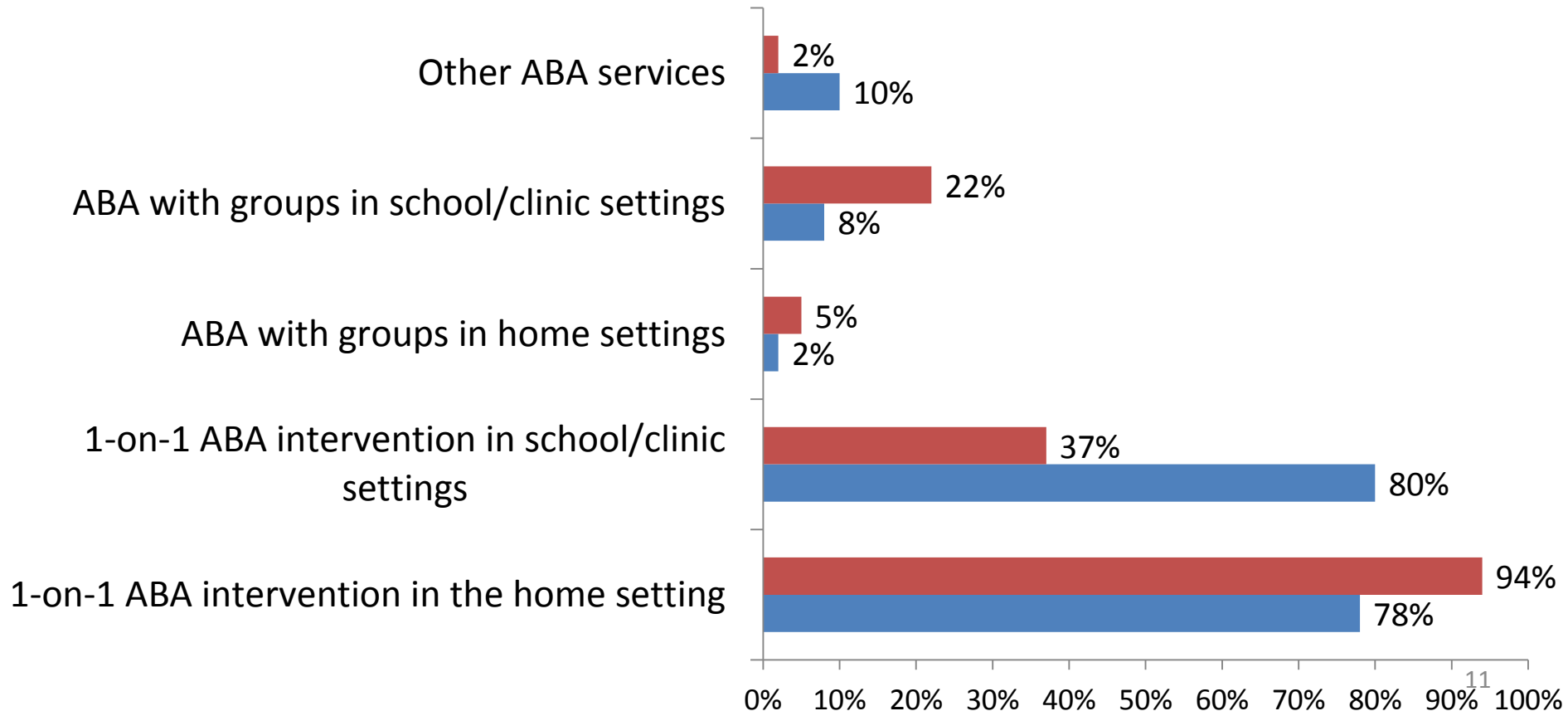




Method: Exploratory Questions

“What kind of ABA services do you provide to recipients?”

■ SD ■ NOLA





Method: Exploratory Questions

“Have you ever worked with a client that exhibited any of the following behaviors”

■ SD ■ NOLA

I have not worked with extreme behaviors

2%
2%

Other, extreme behavior

22%
26%

Dangerous elopement

53%
52%

Aggression towards self

85%
82%

Aggression toward others

97%
96%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%



Method: MBI-HSS

- Maslach Burnout Inventory – Human Services Survey
 - 22 items capturing the three dimensions of burnout (i.e., emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment)
 - Items consist of job-related feelings that are scored on a 7-point scale of how often the feeling is experienced ranging from never (1) to every day (7)



Method: MBI-HSS

Maslach Burnout Inventory sample items

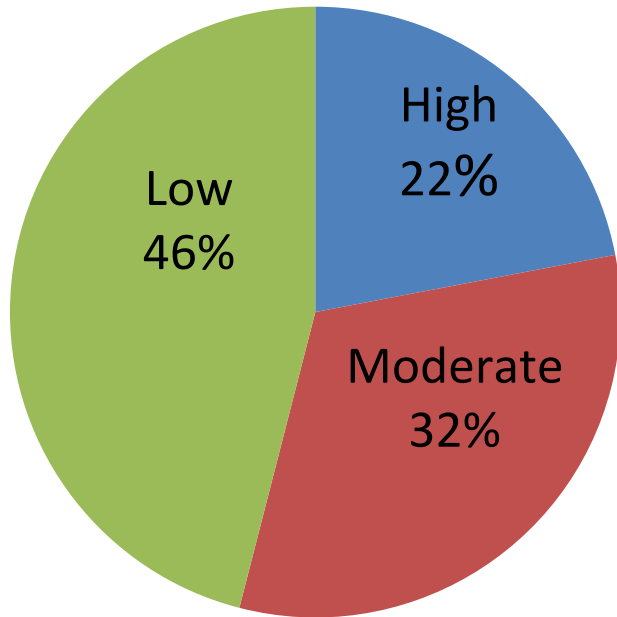
Inventory Item	Scale	Average response
I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.	Emotional Exhaustion	Once a month or less
I can easily understand how my recipients feel about things.	Personal Accomplishment	A few times a week
I feel I treat some recipients as if they were impersonal objects.	Depersonalization	Never

Note: 7-point Scale: 1 = Never, 2 = A few times a year or less, 3 = Once a month or less, 4 = A few times a month, 5 = Once a week, 6 = A few times a week, 7 = Every Day

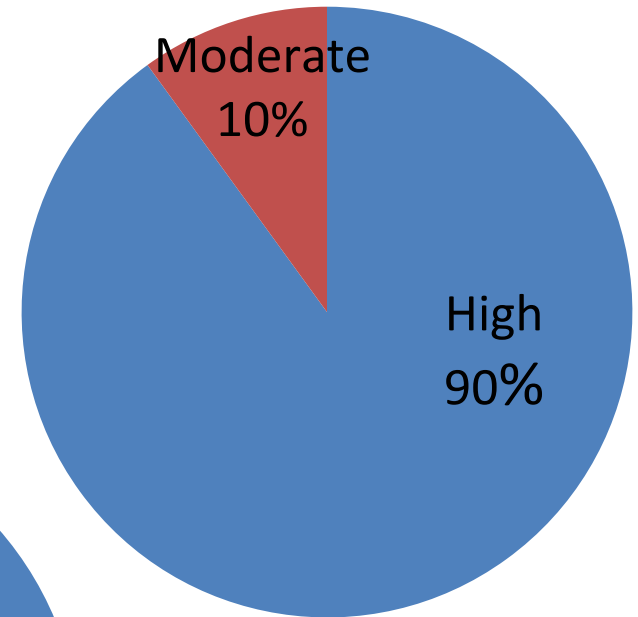


Method: MBI-HSS Descriptive Results

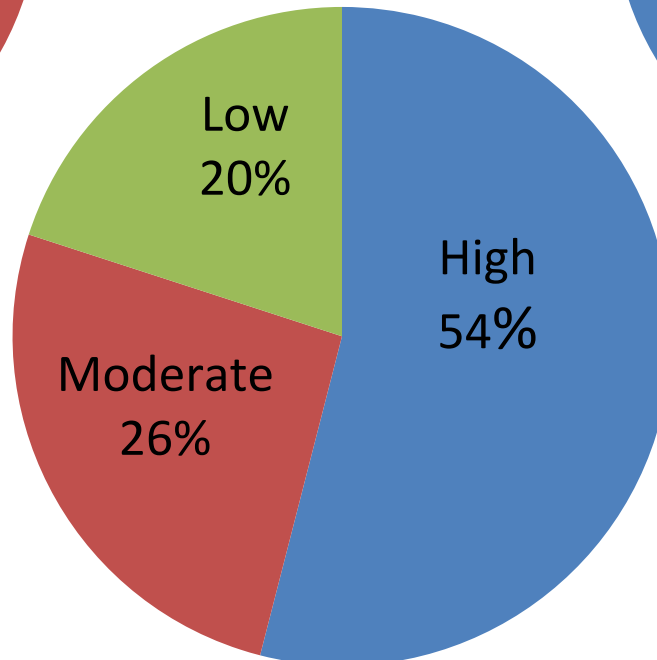
Depersonalization



Personal Accomplishment



Emotional Exhaustion

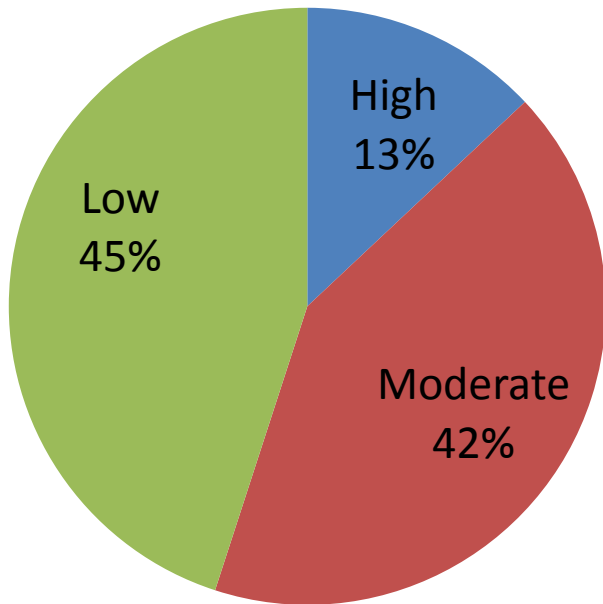


NOLA

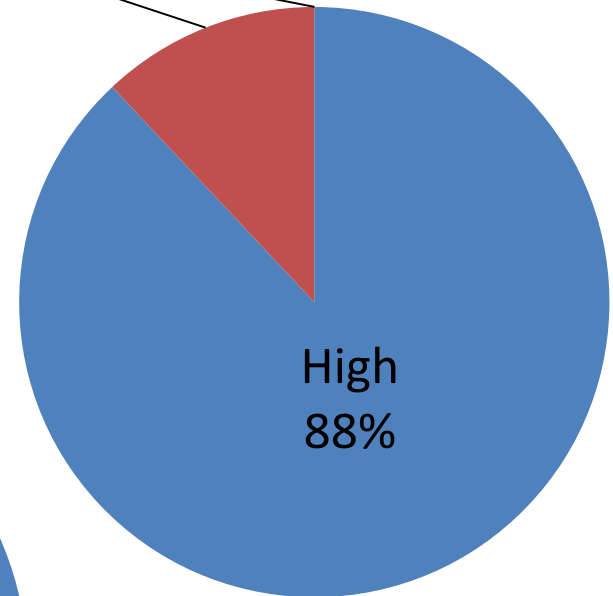


Method: MBI-HSS Descriptive Results

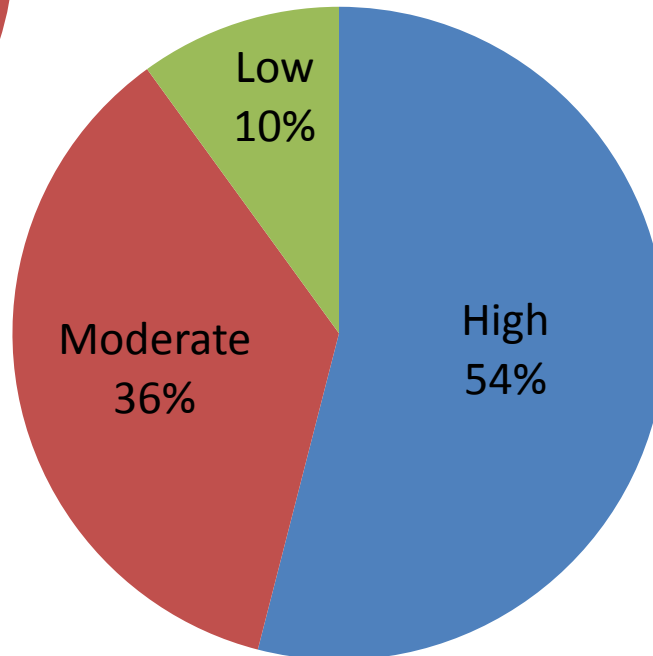
Depersonalization



Personal Accomplishment



Emotional Exhaustion



**SAN
DIEGO**



Method: SPSS

- Scale of Perceived Supervisor Support
 - 8 items selected from the original Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (SPOS) from which the word “organization” was replaced with the word “supervisor” (Eisenberger et al., 2002)
 - e.g. “My supervisor values my contribution”
 - Statements about perceptions regarding supervisor feelings rated on a 7-point likert scale from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly agree”
- Supervisor support is operationally defined as an employees’ perception concerning the extent to which their supervisor values their contribution in their work and cares about their well-being.



Method: SPSS Descriptive Results

Scale Item	Average response
My supervisor values my contribution	Moderately agree
My supervisor fails to appreciate any effort from me	Slightly disagree
My supervisor would ignore any complain from me	Moderately disagree
My supervisor really cares about my well-being	Moderately agree
Even if I did the best job possible, my supervisor would fail to notice	Moderately disagree
My supervisor cares about my general satisfaction at work	Moderately agree
My supervisor takes pride in my accomplishments	Moderately agree
My supervisor shows very little concern for me	Moderately disagree



Method: Open-ended

- Open-ended question
 - “Using as much or as little detail as you would like, specify an example of what your direct supervisor could do to positively impact your feelings of effectiveness and personal success while in the field”
 - Themes and subthemes were identified from participant responses



Hypothesis Testing

- Independent Variable
 - Perception of Supervisor Support (IV)
- Dependent variables:
 - Emotional Exhaustion (DV1)
 - Depersonalization (DV2)
 - Personal Accomplishment (DV3)
- Pearson Product-Moment Correlations
- Exploratory Analyses
- T-testing for significance



Hypothesis Testing: Results (NOLA)

- Supervisor Support & Emotional Exhaustion
 - **Small-moderate** negative effects
- Supervisor Support & Depersonalization
 - **Small** positive effects
- Supervisor Support & Personal Accomplishment
 - **Large** positive effects
 - Significant at $p < .01$
- Additionally:
 - Emotional Exhaustion & Personal Accomplishment
 - **Small-moderate** negative effects ; significant at $p < .01$



Hypothesis Testing: Results (n=145)

- Supervisor Support & Emotional Exhaustion
 - **Moderate-large** negative effects
 - Significant at $p < .001$
- Supervisor Support & Personal Accomplishment
 - **Moderate** positive effects
 - Significant at $p < .001$
- Additionally:
 - Emotional Exhaustion & Personal Accomplishment
 - **Moderate-large** negative effects ; significant at $p < .001$



Quantitative Exploratory Analyses

- Number of behaviors & Emotional Exhaustion
 - **Moderate** positive relationship
 - Support from Others & Personal Accomplishment
 - **Moderate-large** positive relationship
 - Support from Others & Supervisor Support
 - **Moderate-large** positive relationship
- Significant at $p < 0.01$



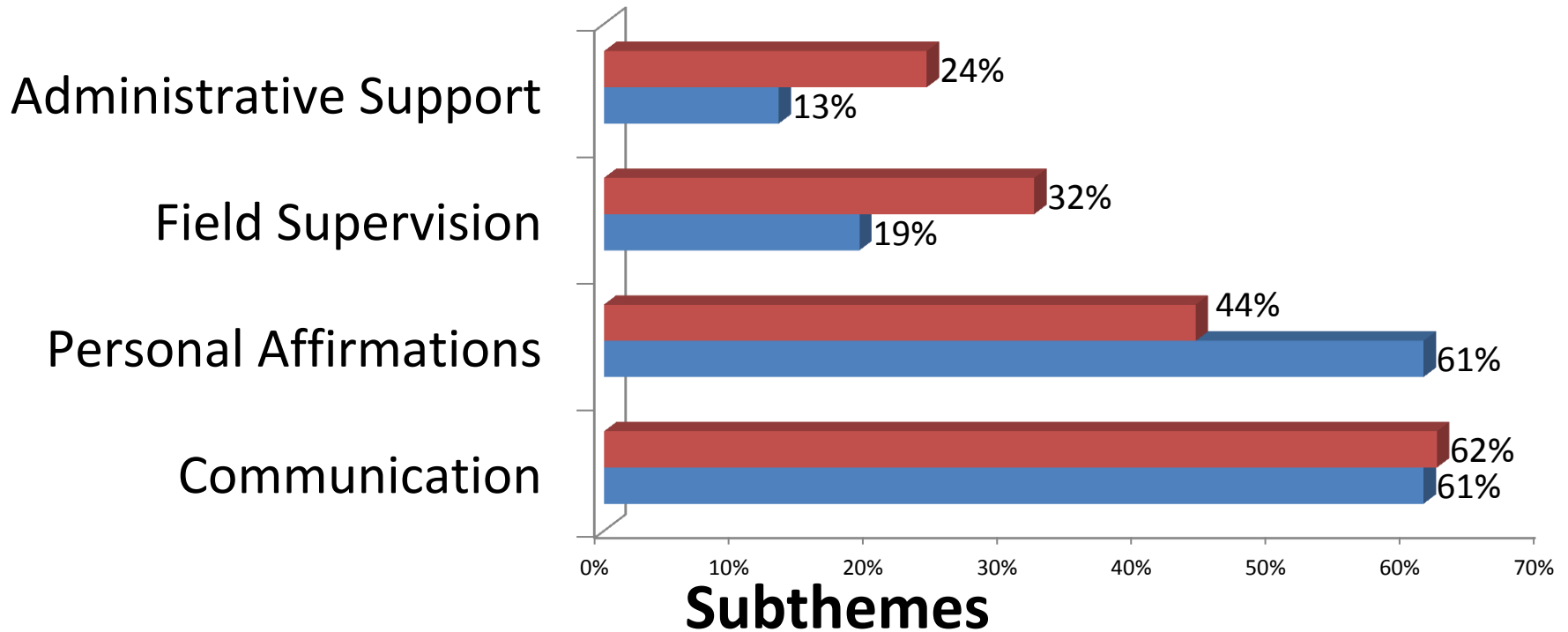
Qualitative Analysis

- Descriptive statistics:
 - 62% of participants responded
 - 26% of participants stated an example of what their supervisor already does that positively affects them
 - 71% of participants stated an example of what their supervisor could change that would result in increased perceptions of support
 - 22% of participants felt strongly supported and would not change anything about their supervisory experience



Qualitative Analysis

■ SD ■ NOLA



Communication: 8

Personal Affirmations: 4

Field Supervision: 4

Administrative Support: 4



Qualitative Analysis

- Communication

- Provide feedback and answer my questions: 39%
- Allow me to have input regarding client programming: 16%

“Emails of things that look good and what work is positive; would also like emails on what could be worked on as well.”

“I feel like my supervisor does more than an excellent job. Between Cancelations from both myself and parents my supervisor always finds a way to come in and on days that she doesn't calling her is always a great option!”



Qualitative Analysis

- Personal Affirmations

- Provide recognition of good work in the field: 63%
- Recognize and respond to my strengths: 32%

“Provide more positive feedback. Tell me when I have done a good job and acknowledge how much growth has occurred.”

“She always makes sure we are on the same page and asks frequently how I am doing and do I have enough support.”



Qualitative Analysis

- **Field Supervision**

- Provide models for methods of addressing maladaptive behaviors: 33%
- Provide more opportunities for 1-on-1 meetings: 33%

“Tell me I'm doing a good job, celebrate accomplishments with me, talk to me one-on-one.”

“She does a good job of going over her observations at the end of session and suggesting new things try and encouraging me to continue certain things that she found to be effective”



Qualitative Analysis

- **Administrative Support**

- Respond to complaints and help get them addressed: 50%
- Help me develop professional goals/help to obtain raises/provide formal performance evaluations: 25%

“Consistently update on what I've done right and what I could do better since I believe this Promotes motivation and professional advancement.

“My direct supervisor does the most to his abilities to uphold my feelings of effectiveness and personal success. If any of these feelings seem to falter, we tend to be able to work together in order to adequately resolve the issues. If we cannot seem to, it's usually due to an issue with company policy.”



Themes/subthemes

	<u>NOLA</u>	<u>SD</u>
Communication	61%	62%
Providing feedback and answering my questions	63%	39%
Allow me to have input regarding client programming	16%	0%
Initiate contact more often for "check in"s	11%	39%
Communicate more	11%	17%
Be available/receptive for questions and concerns	11%	10%
Debrief about personal feelings, help to manage work-related stress	5%	10%
Provide feedback beyond recipient programs/goals	5%	5%
Set clear expectations and follow through with commitments	2%	2%
Professional Affirmations	61%	44%
Recognition in the field (e.g. "you are doing a good job")	63%	55%
Recognize and respond to strengths	32%	21%
Make me feel heard and appreciated via collaboration	26%	17%
Provide recognition of my work to others	5%	14%



Themes/subthemes

	<u>NOLA</u>	<u>SD</u>
Field Supervision	19%	32%
Provide models for methods of dealing with maladaptive behaviors	33%	24%
Provide more opportunities for 1 on 1 meetings	33%	19%
Provide more supervision/see therapist more often	16%	29%
Provide more support on the more difficult clients than the less difficult clients	16%	10%
Administrative Support	13%	24%
Respond to complaints and help get them addressed	50%	19%
Help me develop professional goals	25%	38%
Help to obtain raises/financial support	25%	19%
Provide formal performance evaluations	25%	³¹ 13%



Interpretation of Major Findings

- Participants that reported higher perceptions of supervisor support also reported reduced feelings of emotional exhaustion and as well as increased perceptions of personal accomplishment.
 - Supervisor support had moderate-to-large negative effects on Emotional Exhaustion
 - Supervisor support had moderate positive effects on Personal Accomplishment
- These findings are consistent with other studies that have measured PSS and burnout using these measures (Gibson, Grey, & Hastings, 2009)



A recurring desire to be effective

- “My supervisor has been very supportive of everything I do and is always trying to find opportunities to help me become more successful.”
- “I think constant communication its imperative for a great work outcome for the BI ensuring great work for the recipient. The BI and the supervisor have to be on the same page as far as the goals and how to attain/work towards those goals for the recipient.”
- “There's times where I feel like I'm not doing my job correctly. My supervisor could positively impact my feelings and effectiveness if he/she would comment on what I'm doing right/wrong. I fear the fact that I may not be helping the clients the way I'm supposed to.”



Implications continued

- Experiences of Emotional Exhaustion + Increased Perceptions of Support = Therapeutic Efficacy
 - 54% of the present sample reported their emotional exhaustion as “high” – mitigate through supervisor support!
- Being able to perceive support is critical to a successful therapeutic team
- More experience does not necessarily mean more adept at managing burnout
- Less experience does not necessarily mean reduced feelings of accomplishment



Implications continued

- Perceptions of supervisor support were core to the research question posed in this study, thus it was important to explore specific means by which supervisor support could be increased.
- What do interventionists want?
 - More communication!!
 - To feel, through specific feedback, that they are implementing ABA correctly
 - A “personal touch” that goes beyond the job description



Limitations

- Convenience sample
- Lack of generalizability to other types of therapists
- Internal validity and reliability of online research



Future Directions for Research

- Collect more data on the experiences of ABA interventionists through longitudinal studies and the specific factors that may increase perceptions of burnout
- Evaluate perceptions of supervisor support from the supervisor against reception of that support from the interventionist
- Implement strategies and techniques that may actively mediate burnout in this vulnerable population of providers



Final thoughts

- Reducing burnout leads to greater quality of life for therapists and greater efficacy of therapy for clients
- Supervisors and the organizations they represent should commit themselves through attention and innovation to having the highest standards of happy, healthy, and effective interventionists



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