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Research Article

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## Differentiation of Self Predicts Counselor Burnout Through Effective Psychological Counselor Characteristics

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### Abstract

Understanding effective psychological counselor characteristics and counselor burnout necessitates consideration of the family of origin as a pertinent factor. Differentiation of self may be one of the factors associated with these characteristics and counselor burnout. Psychological counselors with lower differentiation of self may fail to maintain emotional boundaries in a therapeutic process, resulting in counselor burnout. The present cross-sectional study undertook an examination of the mediating role played by effective psychological counselor characteristics within the context of the association between differentiation of self and counselor burnout. The sample comprised 240 Turkish psychological counselors actively engaged in psychological counseling practices, working mainly in schools. Participants responded to items in a survey including Differentiation of Self Inventory Short Form (DSI-SF), Effective Counselor Characteristics Scale (ECCS), Counselor Burnout Inventory (CBI), and a Demographic Information Form. Findings showed that differentiation of self has a direct effect on counselor burnout (Hypothesis 1), and effective psychological counselor characteristics mediated the association between differentiation of self and counselor burnout (Hypothesis 2). The path of differentiation of self to effective psychological counselor characteristics to counselor burnout explained 48% of the variance. The ongoing investigation has revealed the potential threats linked to reduced self-differentiation concerning effective psychological counselor characteristics and the phenomenon of counselor burnout.

### Key Words

Differentiation of self • Effective psychological counselor characteristics • Psychological counselor burnout

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## Introduction

Increasingly adverse life events, including traumas and crises, have drawn attention to how individuals recover from such experiences. Mental health professionals assist their clients with that purpose in a therapeutic recovery process, but how they manage the secondary effects of these adverse on them doesn't pique much of researchers' interest. One of the risks for mental health specialists is burnout because prolonged exposure to trauma-related anxious feelings or stress experienced by clients may lead to emotionally dysfunctional responses for therapists (Craig & Sprang, 2010). Three elements of burnout indicate a cluster of work-related psychological dysfunction that typically affects individuals with no history of mental or psychological diseases (Maslach et al., 2001; Maslach & Leiter, 2016): (a) *Emotional exhaustion* may also be characterized by fatigue, referring to losing the sense of emotional energy or emotional deprivation to one's bodily and emotional capacities being exhausted. (b) *Cynicism* is the loss of enthusiasm, and idealistic thinking, developing a negative mindset toward clients, and emotionally distancing from others that depersonalize human services. (c) *Inefficacy* refers to employees' self-evaluations, indicating a lower sense of productivity, capability, or achievement relative to the job requirements. Psychological counseling is one of the professions that received researchers' (Lee et al. 2010) attention regarding burnout, especially when they lose the balance between clients' needs, their own needs, and stress-producing circumstances in their job (Maslach, 2017), which may affect the well-being and professional efficiency of counselors.

## Counselor Burnout

Similar to Maslach's (2001) burnout configuration, Lee et al. (2007) suggested five dimensions of burnout for psychological counselors also provide a theoretical basis for the study: (a) *Exhaustion* refers to the extent to which a counselor becomes tired or distressed physically and emotionally due to the responsibilities of being a counselor. (b) *A negative work environment* is indicative of a scenario wherein the workplace or work-related circumstances assume the role of originating factors associated with feelings of frustration, perceived unfairness, and heightened levels of exhaustion, extending beyond considerations of personal or interpersonal factors. (c) *Devaluing client* reflects Maslach's Depersonalization dimension that counselors become more unemphatic or insensitive to clients' needs. (d) *Incompetence* refers to a counselor's feelings of non-confidence or inadequacy to assist clients. (e) *Deterioration of personal life* reflects the limited space for a counselor to spend more time on personal interests, relationships with significant others, or self-development. Later, Lee et al. (2010) filtrated these five dimensions into another configuration of burnout for psychological counselors with three dimensions: (1) *Well-adjusted counselors* have high-functioning characteristics as they have lower scores in all five dimensions of counselor burnout. (2) *Disconnected counselors* score medium to high in five counselor burnout dimensions. However, this profile matches more with Depersonalization Clients (DC); counselors with this profile have the lowest job satisfaction and worst self-esteem compared to other burnout profiles. (3) Although they have higher scores on exhaustion in their workplace or personal life, *persevering counselors* are psychologically more flexible and sensitive to the needs that clients bring to the therapeutic process. Counselors exhibiting this particular profile demonstrate elevated levels of self-esteem and possess a greater breadth of professional experience, despite concurrently reporting a notable degree of job dissatisfaction. (Lee et al., 2010).

Literature indicates several factors relating to burnout in mental health workers. The work environment is one of the organizational factors for counselor burnout. For instance, psychological counselors who work with offenders or work in prisons as correctional counselors (professional counselors working in prisons) reported higher burnout levels (Carrola et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2010). Individual factors may also play a role in counselor burnout. For instance, Lee et al. (2011) emphasized the risks of overinvolvement, which may cause burnout while improving a therapist's sense of self-accomplishment. Psychological counselors become excessively involved in their clients' psychological care because they may have a secondary gain of accomplishment that rewards over-involved actions, which may result in emotional exhaustion with the therapeutic process. Fye et al. (2020) also asserted that *Impotence* is another individual factor in understanding counselor burnout. School counselors may handle this sense by using avoidant-emotional coping strategies, resulting in the *Devaluing Clients* dimension of burnout. On the other hand, role ambiguity, role incongruity, and job dissatisfaction are organizational factors that predict counselor burnout (Fye et al., 2020). Likewise, role conflict and ambiguity have been identified as risk factors associated with counselor burnout within the context of Türkiye, as evidenced by Özer (1998). The vast majority of Turkish psychological counselors work in schools (Korkut, 2007). For instance, Turkish psychological counselors' dysfunctional self-efficacy beliefs (as an individual factor) in assisting their students may relate to counselor burnout levels (Öztabak, 2018). Conversely, potential remedies for mitigating counselor burnout may come to fruition if school counselors are not assigned non-counseling responsibilities within their educational institutions, receive comprehensive supervision pertaining to their occupational growth, and acquire more efficacious and task-oriented stress management skills, as posited by Kim and Lambie (2018).

We suppose that family of origin may also be a potential predictor in understanding counselor burnout and effective counselor characteristics. Intimacy is one of the most paradoxical concepts in human relationships, reflecting several intrinsic requirements and challenges, such as separateness vs. closeness (Williamson, 1991). Bowen's Family Systems Theory (BFST; Bowen, 1978) uses the psychological construct of differentiation of self (DoS) to address this dilemma in family dynamics. The elevated level of DoS effectively upholds the inherent requisites of both autonomy and intimacy in equilibrium; nevertheless, it is noteworthy that this predicament transcends the confines of the family milieu and extends to other spheres of human interaction. We suppose that a therapeutic relationship may also require such an equilibrium between counselor and client that over-involvement, emotional exhaustion or depersonalization emerge otherwise.

### **Differentiation of Self**

The fundamental component of BFST is DoS, which calls for two key competencies (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988): (1) For more effective DoS, one recognizes a distinction between cognitive processes and emotional responses to stressful circumstances. Through the application of this approach, individuals can effectively respond to challenges within their proximate relationships in a rational manner, circumventing automatic emotional reactions. This capacity is particularly advantageous in the context of stressful and anxiety-inducing situations. Moreover, individuals often encounter heightened difficulty in regulating their emotions and cognitive processes when confronted with adverse circumstances, as is elucidated within the intrapsychic dimension. Additionally, another

salient dimension encompasses the ability to concurrently attain individuation while preserving authentic and close interpersonal connections with significant others in one's social milieu, constituting the interpersonal dimension. In the lack of higher DoS, emotional symptoms may develop within the family system, such as triangling (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). A triangle represents the smallest emotional unit of a trio among family members. Although children are involved in triangles as they are the least-differentiated family members, the third part may be an outside individual such as a friend or therapist (Bowen, 1978). The role of the third person in a trio might be to reduce the chronic anxiety in a dyad's conflict or family crises (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Bell et al. (2001) classified triangles into distinct dimensions: *Mediator* reflects the third person's pull-in position as a peacemaker between two members of the triangle by alleviating both sides and forming more intimate bonds with either part of the triangle than they do with one another. *Scapegoating* reflects the third person's pull-out position as other parts of the triangle become more preoccupied with the scapegoated individual's actions than their dyadic relationship. *Coalitions* reflect the side-taking position of the third person in a triangle. Within familial dynamics, it is not uncommon to observe the formation of emotional alliances between a parent and one of their children, often uniting against the third member of the family unit. An illustrative example would involve the alignment of the mother and a child in opposition to the father. In a related context, the term *balanced* signifies a state characterized by equitably distanced emotional boundaries maintained among all members comprising a triangular relational configuration. Members of a triangle can manage their conflicts constructively and psychological distress in their dyadic relationship.

The point is that individuals with lower DoS are more prone to be involved in triangles (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Integrating Bell et al. (2001) configuration into a therapeutic process, for instance, a family counselor with lower DoS may unconsciously attempt to reduce the dyadic tension by positioning in the mediator role as the counselor internalizes this calming role in the family of origin triangles. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that family counselors may inadvertently become participants in the process of aligning with one side or another within the familial context, thus inadvertently contributing to side-taking dynamics. The counselor may take sides with one spouse that the counselor perceives is more aggrieved in the relationship, ignoring that both parties may somehow contribute to the development of the relationship problem. Over-involvement or emotional contagion (Hatfield et al., 1993) may blur the boundaries between therapist and clients in a therapeutic relationship. Bowen (1978) defined such blurred boundaries among family members as *fusion*. When the fusion is the case, counselors may suffer in a therapeutic context to manage their emotional reactions to the clients and avoid imposing their values onto their clients as opposed to ACA's (2014) ethical rules. The capacity to maintain the balance between closeness and separateness is related to the therapist's DoS level (Bowen, 1978). Some counselors may be more prone to burnout than others, which may be explained by how they manage their emotions in the context of a disequilibrium of closeness and separateness. On the other hand, we suppose that psychological counselors with higher DoS may more likely have several effective counselor characteristics that protect them against burnout.

### Effective Psychological Counselor Characteristics

What kind of personal and professional characteristics a psychological counselor should have has been a long-standing topic. One point of this discussion, for example, is based on the observations of those who take part in the training of prospective psychological counselors because while some trainees adapt to this new role quickly, some trainees have difficulty in fulfilling what is expected of them and adapting to the characteristics of a psychological counselor (Rowe et al., 1975). The experts in psychological counseling are beginning to acknowledge the need to consider personal characteristics when selecting and retaining students in their training programs; however, there is less consensus on these characteristics (Pope & Kline, 1999). Some experts in psychological counseling listed the most remarkable personal characteristics of effective psychological counselors, such as (1) unconditional acceptance of clients, (2) being emotionally stable, (3) skill of empathy, (4) being open-minded, (5) being genuine, (6) being flexible, (7) having an interest in others, (8) having self-confidence, (9) being sensitive to client's needs, and (10) fairness (Pope & Kline, 1999). İköz and Totan (2014) illustrated six dimensions in the assessment of effective psychological counselor characteristics in a Turkish sample: (a) *Intellectual competence* refers to a counselor's cognitive skills to contribute to the client's well-being, besides a curiosity to develop these skills when necessary in conceptualization, decision-making, or interviewing processes. (2) *Energy* refers to a psychological counselor's physical and emotional dynamism that can give clients the confidence they need and make them feel that they are in safe hands in a therapeutic process. (3) *Flexibility* refers to the ability of a psychological counselor to adapt necessary methods, theoretical approaches, and technological requirements into the process depending on the client's therapeutical needs. (4) *Support* reflects that a psychological counselor maintains the balance that clients can have the responsibilities of their own choices without being dependent on the psychological counselor. However, the therapeutic process with support should still include hope and emotional safety. (5) *Goodwill* constitutes an essential responsibility of psychological counselors, entailing the conscientious avoidance of prioritizing their own emotional requisites over the therapeutic needs of their clients, while concurrently upholding ethical standards and a sense of accountability. (6) *Self-awareness* reflects that psychological counselors recognize their personal strengths and limitations besides the psychological and technical needs within a therapeutic process. Thus, the psychological counselor manages the most appropriate psychological roadmap to structure and maintain the counseling relationship.

The research revealed that effective psychological counselor characteristics may also impact career-related processes. For instance, Turkish psychological counselors with effective psychological counselor characteristics and subjective well-being reported higher career adaptability (Özbiler et al., 2022). Nevertheless, there exist certain impediments that psychological counselors may encounter in their endeavors to embody and exhibit these efficacious characteristics. For instance, Baştumur and Uçar (2022) defined these obstacles congruently with İköz and Totan's characteristics. In their data, self-awareness, good intentions, and flexibility were predominant predictors of effective psychological counselor characteristics in the empowerment needs of Turkish school counselors. Additionally, it is worth noting that a subset of Turkish school counselors has reported deficiencies in both knowledge and skill, indicative of a deficit within the *Intellectual Competence* dimension. Concurrently, these counselors have also indicated a lower level of self-awareness in the context of their counseling practices.

### **Rationale of the Current Study**

Research that focuses on the family-of-origin experiences of psychological counselors and their effective counselor characteristics and burnout is scarce. Softas-Nall et al. (2001) reported that family of origin, which indicates the family health level of participants and some aspects of personality traits (e.g., social introversion), contributed to the prediction of counselor trainees' effectiveness. In a parallel vein, Alber (1991) has asserted that DoS plays a significant role in shaping the skill set of counselor trainees concerning their positions within the familial structure of their origin. The trainee would be a triangulated child in the family of origin to reduce the dyadic anxiety. Because of the anxiety-reducing role in the family of origin and inflexibility against compelling emotions such as anxiety, the trainee would not prefer to mention an anxiety-related issue of the client in a therapeutic process as an indicator of lower DoS. DoS is a skill that individuals develop in their family of origin. An individual born in a dysfunctional family dynamic will likely have a low level of DoS and difficulty balancing between closeness and separateness, especially when various sources of stress emerge in their social and close relationships (Bowen, 1978). For example, individuals of this nature may encounter challenges in effectively managing and coping with complex emotions, including but not limited to feelings of anxiety, antipathy, and remorse, experienced within the context of their partner's emotional landscape. Such emotional turmoil may be exacerbated in the presence of conflicts, thereby rendering them ill-equipped to navigate and effectively manage these tumultuous periods within their romantic relationships. They may prefer dysfunctional ways to deal with these feelings, such as emotional cutoff (Kerr & Bowen, 1998), which will likely cause them to feel more exhausted in the relationship. Similarly, the therapy setting has a context in which clients experience such emotions. While working with these emotions, psychological counselors with greater DoS, on the other hand, can differentiate their emotions from thoughts (intrapsychic dimension) and maintain therapeutic boundaries with the client (interpersonal dimension) against emotional exhaustion. Hence, we posit that the theoretical underpinnings of the present model hold the potential to make a valuable scholarly contribution to the existing literature by enhancing our comprehension of the significance of family of origin dynamics in influencing the effectiveness of psychological counselors. Moreover, to date, no research has ever investigated the mediating role of effective psychological counselor characteristics in the associations between family-of-origin (i.e., differentiation of self) and counselor burnout. Our study formulated two hypotheses:

\* H<sub>1</sub> (DoS to counselor burnout): Psychological counselors with higher DoS will report lower counselor burnout.

\* H<sub>2</sub> (DoS to effective psychological counselor characteristics to counselor burnout): Psychological counselors with higher DoS will report higher effective psychological counselor characteristics and lower counselor burnout.

### **Method**

#### **Participants and Sampling**

In total, 240 psychological counselors (169 female, 70.4%; 71 male, 29.6%) participated in the study from different regions of Türkiye. We applied a purposive sampling strategy in data gathering. The participation criteria were being actively engaged in psychological counseling practices. The mean age for our study was 33.53 years (*SD*

= 7.59), ranging between 25-41 years (75%). Only ten participants (4.2%) had not graduated from the Department of Psychological Counseling and Guidance. Among the cohort of 162 participants, a majority, comprising 67.5%, possess bachelor's degrees, while 78 (32.5%) individuals among the surveyed psychological counselors have completed advanced degrees, namely master of science and doctoral qualifications. In total, 176 participants reported that they evaluate themselves as an effective psychological counselor (73.3%), and 64 participants have not stable opinions on their competence (26.7%). The mean for the years of experience in psychological counseling was 10.31 ( $SD=7.71$ ), ranging between 1 and 31 years. 71 (29.6%) participants were working as a school counselor in secondary schools, 69 (28.8%) were in high schools, 47 (19.6%) were in primary schools, 13 (5.4%) were in kindergarten, 18 (7.5%) were in Guidance and Research Centers, and 22 (9.1%) were others such as private practice in psychological counseling.

### **Procedure**

We collected the data through an online survey method, and the first page of Google Forms contained a consent form for participants to declare their voluntariness to participate in the current study. The link for the survey has been delivered to several WhatsApp groups of psychological counselors along with the purpose of the study. These WhatsApp groups were created by psychological counselors (e.g., school counselors) in different cities to maintain academic coordination or information-sharing. The researchers established communication with psychological counselors situated in diverse geographic locations via telephone calls and electronic correspondence, specifically email and WhatsApp. Subsequently, they requested these counselors to disseminate the online survey link within their respective professional networks.

### **Research Instruments**

**Differentiation of Self Inventory Short Form (DSI-SF).** The scale was developed (Drake et al., 2015) to evaluate the DoS and contains 20 items (with a 6-point Likert type, 1; not at all true of me to 6; very true of me). Cronbach's Alpha coefficients (for the dimensions and total score) are between .68 and .88, and test-retest reliability is .72 to .85 (Drake et al., 2015). The minimum and maximum scores differ from 5 to 30 on mean values in total score. Higher scores indicate higher DoS. Turkish DSI-SF (Sarıkaya et al., 2018) revealed .61 to .82 Cronbach's Alpha and .70 to .86 test-retest reliability coefficients. Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's Omega coefficients of the DSI-SF were between .88 in the current study. An item example is "Even under pressure I try to stay fairly calm."

**Effective Counselor Characteristics Scale (ECCS).** The scale was developed (İkiz & Totan, 2014) to evaluate the several effective psychological counselor characteristics (i.e., self-awareness, energy, support flexibility, goodwill, and intellectual competency), contains 26 items (with a 5-point Likert type, 1; not at all true of me to 5; very true of me). Cronbach's Alpha coefficients (for the dimensions and total score) are between .63 and .90, and test-retest reliability .67 to .78 (İkiz & Totan, 2014). The minimum and maximum scores vary from 26 to 130 in total scores. Higher scores indicate higher effective counselor characteristics. Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's Omega coefficients of the ECCS's total score were .92 in the current study. An item example was "I love being a psychological counselor."

**Counselor Burnout Inventory (CBI).** The scale was originally developed (Lee et al., 2007) to evaluate the burnout levels of American psychological counselors and contains 19 items (with a 5-point Likert type, 1; never true to 5; always true). Cronbach's Alpha coefficients (for the dimensions and total score) were between .68 and .88, and test-retest reliability of .73 to .85 (Lee et al., 2007). The range of scores observed in the assessment spans from a minimum of 19 to a maximum of 95. It is important to note that higher total scores on this assessment are indicative of elevated levels of burnout. Turkish CBI (Guler & Turkum, 2019) revealed .61 to .82 Cronbach's Alpha and .71 to .89 test-retest reliability coefficients. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the CBI's total score was .90. McDonald's Omega coefficient was .91 in the current study. The item example is "I have very little empathy with my clients."

**Demographic Information Form.** We developed a study-oriented form to evaluate the demographic characteristics, including gender, age, service years, and education levels of the participants.

### Data Analysis

We conducted preliminary analyses, including descriptives, bivariate analyses, and assumption testing through SPSS 22 (IBM, 2013). We implemented the bootstrapping technique for the mediation analyses to adjust the inflated chi-square statistic (Nevitt & Hancock, 1998) within the Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE in AMOS 24; Arbuckle, 2016). We considered the fit indices of  $\chi^2/df$ -ratio  $< 5$  (Kline, 1998), CFI and TLI  $\geq .93$  (Byrne, 1994), Mediocre fit:  $.08 < RMSEA < .10$  (MacCallum et al., 1996), and SRMR  $< .08$  (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). Because the scales in our model consist of many items to a single latent variable (i.e., 20 items for DoS, 26 items for ECCS, 19 items for CBI), we applied item parcels to adjust structural bias in parameters and measurement errors (Bandalos, 2002). Thus, four parcels for each variable in the structural model were produced, and individual items of the scales were appointed to these parcels through random assignment, for which we considered items' mean values from highest to lowest (Little et al., 2002).

## Results

### Data Preparation, Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations

The data had no missing values as all item's response was mandatory in the online survey form. The data was free from outliers, skewness (highest, 1.79), and kurtosis (highest, 2.84) values were within required limits (Kline, 2011) except five items (in ECSS and CBI) which were slightly exceeded (highest was 3.77) the limits. These particular items were identified as potentially susceptible to outliers, primarily owing to their content, which involves the evaluation of exceptional circumstances not commonly encountered by the majority of psychological counselors. As an illustrative example, one of these items examines the extent of empathy or lack thereof exhibited by counselors toward their clients, a dimension that typically aligns with the fundamental competencies of the counseling profession. The bivariate Pearson correlations were not higher than the cut-off value of .90 (Kline 2011) among study variables which the strongest correlation among study variables was between DoS and burnout ( $r = -.61, p < .001$ ). The tolerance values for each variable were well above .20 (minimum tolerance = .38), and we have no observed violation of linearity and homoscedasticity by examining the scatter and regression plots. The sample revealed a higher level of DoS ( $M = 83.32, SD = 13.89$ ), effective counselor characteristics ( $M = 104.28, SD = 10.96$ ), and

lower burnout ( $M = 36.76$ ,  $SD = 11.65$ ) compared to possible range scores, as shown in Table 1. Further, we also compared participant groups of those who reported themselves as having effective psychological characteristics and those who did not (i.e., 'I am not an efficient psychological counselor,' 'I have to do more' or 'I have no conclusion') through an independent sample t-test. The results indicated that participants who reported themselves as having effective psychological characteristics had higher levels of DoS [ $t(238) = 4.398$ ,  $p < .001$ ], and lower levels of burnout [ $t(238) = -5.424$ ,  $p < .001$ ].

Table 1

*Descriptives, Bivariate Correlations, and Reliabilities of the Study Variables (N=240)*

	1. Differentiation of Self	2. Effective Counseling	3. Burnout
1.	-		
2.	.35**	-	
3.	-.61**	-.38**	-
M	83.32	104.28	36.76
SD	13.89	10.96	11.65
Range	48-119	53-129	19-70

Note. \*\*  $p < 0.001$  (two-tailed).

### Measurement invariance

We examined the measurement invariance of the structural model on gender differences through [JASP Team \(2019\)](#) using four phases of configural, metric, scalar, and strict invariance ([Milfont & Fischer, 2010](#)). We considered fit indices of  $\Delta CFI$ ,  $\Delta RMSEA$ , and  $\Delta TLI$  which the changes should be between -0.01 and 0.01 ([Cheung & Rensvold, 2002](#)). The results indicated that the highest changes in the four phases considering gender were 0.006 for CFI, 0.005 for RMSEA, and 0.007 for TLI, and we concluded that the model met the measurement invariance on gender.

### Mediation Model

The model (see Fig. 1) examined the relationships between DoS and burnout through the effective psychological counselor characteristics. The findings indicated a moderate model fit of  $\chi^2(51) = 152.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\chi^2/df$ -ratio=2.99, CFI=.95, NNFI=.94, SRMR=.04, RMSEA=.091(90% CI=.075-.108). Factor loadings were significantly between .67 and .91. DoS accounted for 14% of the variation in effective psychological counselor characteristics. DoS and effective psychological counselor characteristics accounted for 48% of the variation in psychological counselor burnout. The direct effect of DoS on psychological counselor burnout ( $\beta = -.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was significant.

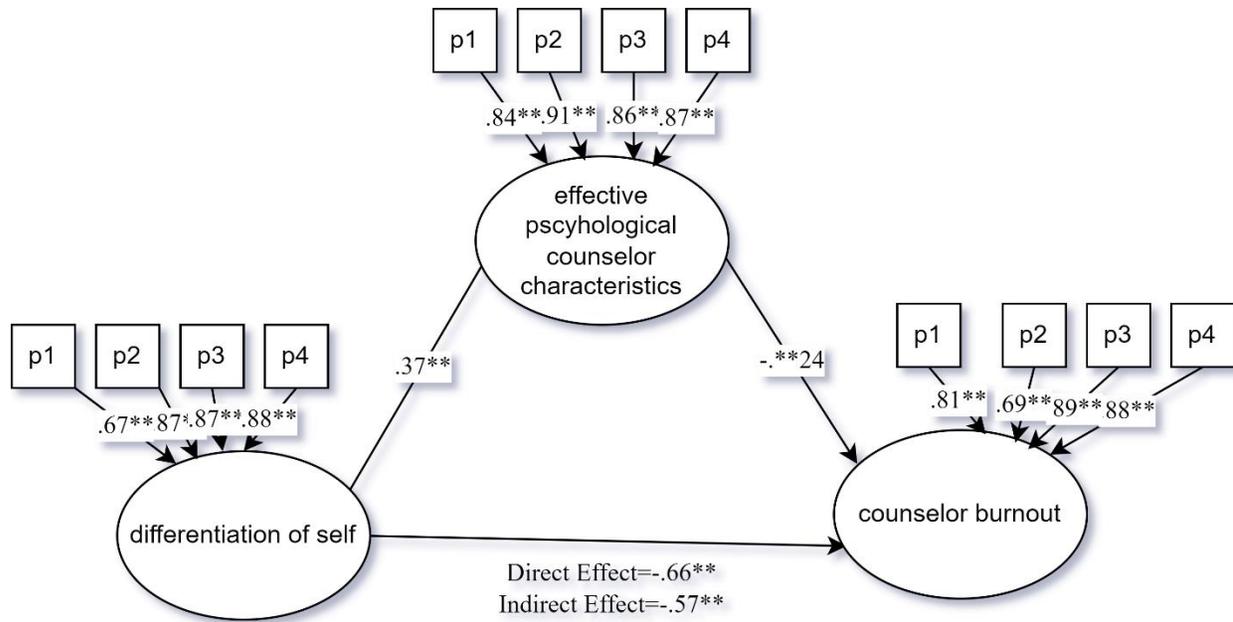


Figure 1. Standardized coefficients and paths (\*\*  $p < .001$ )

**H<sub>1</sub> (DoS to psychological counselor burnout).** The direct effect of DoS on psychological counselor burnout ( $\beta = -.57, p < .001$ ) was significant in the mediation model. An observable trend emerges wherein psychological counselors with a heightened degree of DoS tend to manifest lower reported levels of burnout.

**H<sub>2</sub> (DoS to effective psychological counselor characteristics to psychological counselor burnout).** The indirect effect of DoS on psychological counselor burnout through effective psychological counselor characteristics ( $\beta = -.11, p < .010, [CI = -.05, -.17]$ ) was significant. Psychological counselors exhibiting a higher degree of DoS tend to report elevated levels of effective psychological counselor characteristics and concurrently exhibit reduced instances of psychological counselor burnout.

## Discussion

### First Hypothesis

The first hypothesis investigated if DoS directly affects psychological counselor burnout, and the findings indicated a statistically significant direct relationship. More specifically, psychological counselors with greater DoS reported lower psychological counselor burnout. This significant direct effect contributes to the limited literature regarding the association between DoS and psychological counselor burnout. Researchers found an inverse relationship between DoS and psychological counselor burnout and concluded that DoS should be considered for psychological counselors' burnout levels (Duggan-Waters, 2021; Wallace, 2023) with US samples. Moreover, similar findings (Guarino & Borja, 2019) were reported that DoS dimensions negatively predicted psychological counselor burnout within a Filipino sample. Furthermore, the current findings have also supported an inverse relationship between DoS and psychological counselor burnout within a Turkish culture that has both elements of individualistic and collectivistic elements (İmamoğlu, 1998; Kağıtçıbaşı, 2007).

## Second Hypothesis

When effective characteristics were included in the model, the second hypothesis theoretically consolidated the association between DoS and psychological counselor burnout. When psychological counselors reported greater DoS, they reported higher effective counseling characteristics, resulting in lower burnout. ECCS (İkiz & Totan, 2014) has six dimensions for predicting what characteristics define a psychological counselor as efficient: (1) intellectual competence, (2) energy, (3) flexibility, (4) being supportive to clients, (5) goodwill for clients, and (6) self-awareness. Although we found no study (to our knowledge) that examines the relationships between these components and DoS directly, limited studies investigated some of the psychological counselors' or trainees' characteristics. Empirical evidence suggests that psychological counselors characterized by a lower degree of DoS tend to exhibit a greater propensity for engaging in countertransference behaviors, as well as experiencing heightened levels of overinvolvement or underinvolvement emotions, as indicated by studies (Connery, 2012; Connery & Murdock, 2019). Wozny et al. (2015) emphasized the role of greater DoS in the decision-making abilities of psychological counselor trainees in ethical dilemmas. Sanderlin (2020) reported the role of DoS in managing client stress and interpersonal conflict in association with trainee self-efficacy. Trainees with greater DoS and emotional health had lower distress in their development. Seay (2015) also shows the relationship between DoS and the trainees' self-efficacy. Psychological counselors with greater DoS may be more flexible when they discuss uncomfortable issues such as clients' sexual concerns or behaviors (Heiden-Rootes et al., 2017). One can speculate that greater DoS may provide many advantages for psychological counselors or trainees in their therapeutic skills to have effective counselor characteristics. The current study contributed to research indicating the relationship between DoS and effective psychological counselor characteristics. Moreover, the model extended the understanding of the consequences (i.e., burnout) when psychological counselors have poor DoS and ineffective skills in a therapeutic process.

## Implication for Theory and Research

In accordance with Bowen's Family Systems Theory (BFST; 1978), it is suggested that the psychological counselor's fundamental perspective concerning emotional matters, such as anxiety, as well as their ability to establish and maintain boundaries conducive to intimacy within the therapeutic alliance, may be intricately linked to the counselor's level of DoS. Our results offer empirical support for an association between DoS, having effective counselor characteristics, and patterns of interpersonal relating resulting in burnout. Our findings may suggest that psychological counselors' effective characteristics may be linked to their DoS levels in their relationships with significant others; however, it is incumbent upon these practitioners to assimilate these acquired skills into the fabric of therapeutic relationships they establish with their clients. Although further research is required, attempts in the professional development of psychological counselors and prospective psychological counselors should address that linkage from a theoretical perspective. Moreover, the results are valuable because they indicate how Turkish psychological counselors may develop more effective counselor characteristics against burnout when they have a greater DoS. We suggest for further research including new variables in integrative theoretical models comparable to the model we outlined in the current study, such as resilience may have a tandem with DoS in understanding

psychological counselors' effectiveness as both constructs may emphasize healthy coping mechanisms with anxiety-provoking circumstances in a therapeutic process.

### **Implication for Practice**

One can define a great list of characteristics a psychological counselor should have when working with clients. One of these characteristics that could be at the top of the list is to avoid countertransference as it affects the efficiency of a therapeutic process (Gelso et al., 2002). Psychological counselors and therapists should be careful with their reactions to their clients in a therapeutic context. Researchers preferred to expand the definition of countertransference, which may cover all the emotional responses of a psychological counselor to the client's issues as countertransference (Hayes et al. 1997). Several client characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, problems, or circumstances may cause the counselor's emotional reactivity (Tobin & McCurdy, 2006). Emotional reactivity is one of the sub-dimensions of DoS's assessment (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), referring to the poor functioning of an individual (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Although we did not examine the sub-dimensions of DoS in the model separately, a psychological counselor with lower DoS may have poor functioning in their emotional reactions to the client's issues in the therapeutic process. For this reason, we suggest supervision services be included in the in-service training or curricula for the prospective psychological counselors, besides the currently working counselors, to improve DoS-related skills. Psychological counselors may benefit by considering their dysfunctional emotional management patterns relating to lower DoS in a therapeutic context and how this dysfunction may be causing burnout at work.

### **Limitations**

We define several limitations in the current study. (1) We had a sample imbalance in the current study, in which our participants were mainly female psychological counselors (70.4%). We suggest that future studies be demographically more gender-balanced to improve their representativeness. (2) Although the instruments we used in the current study are psychometrically valid and reliable, they are self-report measures that depend on a psychological counselor's self-awareness of the study variables. (3) The current study has a correlational design nature, in which we can not conclude DoS causes more effective psychological counselor characteristics and counselor burnout, indicating the lack of cause and effect in the relationships. Thus, we suggest a longitudinal design for future research. For instance, prospective psychological counselors' DoS levels may be observed during undergraduate or graduate while they have supervision. (4) Our participants were mainly school psychological counselors, which may limit our conclusions to be generalized to other psychological counselor groups (e.g., private practice).

### **Ethic**

Ethical permission was granted from the institutional review board of Ordu University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (approval number: 2022-150).

"We declare that the research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical

standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The research at hand is devoid of any discernible conflict of interest. The study approved by Social and Humanities Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Ordu University. The authors received no financial support for the authorship, research, and/or publication of this article."

**Author Contributions**

The authors contributed at all stages, including planning, conducting and writing.

**Conflict of Interest**

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

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