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Organizational Factors Contributing to Worker Frustration: The Precursor to Burnout

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This study examined the organizational factors that contribute to workers' frustration with their work situation. The sample included 141 service professionals who attended workshops on burnout in 2001. The purpose of the workshops was to increase awareness regarding the organizational factors that could contribute to burnout. Findings indicate that factors most directly affecting clients were predictive of frustration, rather than factors that may indirectly support service quality or factors impacting workers' professional autonomy. A sense of powerlessness and isolation was also predictive of frustration, suggesting that participants viewed workplace problems as a private rather than an organizational concern. To address workplace concerns, workers can empower themselves for social action by engaging in a dialogue to examine the relationship between work and individual well-being.

Keywords: workers, worker frustration, burnout, empowerment, powerlessness, isolation, workplace

This study examined the organizational factors that contribute to social workers' frustration with their work situation. Understanding workplace factors that may contribute to workers' frustration can shed light on the process of burnout, since, in a stage model of burnout, frustration is characterized as the stage prior to burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2000). Most studies on burnout tend to assess individual characteristics that either contribute to or are symptomatic of burnout, while minimizing organizational factors. By focusing on individual factors, burnout is characterized as a private concern, while an examination of the work environment frames the debate as a public concern. In 1997, Arches identified several workplace concerns related to worker

burnout, suggesting that workers should commit themselves to social action aimed at changing conditions that contribute to burnout among social service professionals. This study examined social workers' and other helping professionals' perceptions of these identified workplace conditions and assessed the extent to which they are associated with workplace frustration. Recommendations for change are made and are based on the study's findings.

Review of the Literature

Burnout is defined as a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job (Maslach 1993; Maslach, et.al., 2000). While initial research was conducted in the social service arena, current research indicates that significant proportions of the population, from factory workers to surgeons, have advanced stages of burnout (Golembiewski, Boudreau, Sun & Luc 1998).

Self-reporting of burnout is most often labeled as feelings of frustration (Keenan & Newton 1984). Symptoms experienced by individuals range from mild frustration, anxiety and depression to more severe emotional reactions often described as emotional exhaustion, or the draining of emotional resources (Daily 1970; Koocher, 1979). Other symptoms include a feeling of depersonalization, described as the development of negative, cynical attitudes towards the recipients of one's service (Maslach 1993; Maslach, et.al., 2000; Schaufali & Burenk 1996), sense of helplessness, progressive apathy, colds and illness in times of stress, becoming angry with clients and coworkers, feeling of immobilization and being pressured, overzealous relief at the end of the day, disillusionment with field of work, increased alcohol or drug use, and work related dreams with anxiety and guilt (Koocher, 1979; Lewis 1980; Lee & Ashforth 1990; Renjilan, Baum & Landry 1998).

Organizational factors identified as contributing to burnout include multiple sponsorship of social work agencies, increased regulation, role conflict, downsizing, and role ambiguity. These organizational factors are of particular concern in the current practice climate of increased privatization (Lewandowski, 1998;

Rosenthal, 2000) managed care (Crotty, 1999; U.S. GAO, 1998), and the projected budget problems currently being experienced in governments across the country (Eaton, 2002). Role conflict and ambiguity, that is, lack of clarity as to what is expected, appropriate, or effective behavior, may be brought about by lack of communication about job expectation and roles, conflict with coworkers or supervisors (Decker & Borgen, 1993; Siefert, Jayaratne, Davis-Sacks, & Chess, 1991; and Snapp 1992), differences between organizational policy and expectations and individual expectations of fairness and equity (Spence, Leschinger, Finegan & Shamian 2001), or value conflict with social work or personal values (Harrison 1980).

Inadequate communication and unrealistic expectations result in staff overload (Ray 1991) and feelings of isolation (Riordan & Saltzer 1992). Social service workers can also become frustrated when more time is spent on paperwork than with clients (Gomez 1995). While pay does not appear to be the motivating factor to work, workers often seek the intrinsic value of the opportunity to help or to have a sense of purpose (Blandertz & Robinson 1997). To further emphasize the impact of the work environment, studies have shown that burnout may be caught from co-workers or supervisors on the job through negative communication (Bakker & Schaufeli 2000; Geurtz, Schaufeli & De Jonge 1998; Mirvis, Graney, & Kilpatrick 1999).

Both age and gender have been associated with workplace frustration and burnout. However, inadequate skills and lack of experience may explain the age differences in levels of burnout, as younger workers are more likely to be inexperienced (Koeske & Kirk, 1995; Rowe 2000). Female workers compose a large percentage of the person-centered working population and may present their own particular problems. Women are often "other focused" and may have difficulty asking for help and support and in communicating their own needs (Davidson & Forester 1995; Gilligan 1982).

To summarize, sources of workplace frustration leading to burnout may originate within the organization, though individual characteristics can contribute to one's ability to cope with high stress work environments. Role conflict and ambiguity, value conflicts, feelings of isolation, and working with high stress clients

or in high stress fields of practice are some of the key organizational factors identified in the literature as contributing to burnout. In terms of individual characteristics, younger workers and women tend to be more vulnerable to burnout than older workers and men.

Engaging in Dialogue to Address Workplace Concerns

When considering strategies for addressing and preventing burnout, Arches (1997) described a process of dialogue in which workers could develop a more critical understanding of themselves as workers in relationship with the organization, themselves, colleagues, the community, and their personal relationships. By engaging in a dialogue, workers could become empowered, decrease their sense of powerlessness and isolation, and be better prepared to address unsatisfactory workplace conditions. As a guide for dialogue, Arches identified four broad areas, each containing a series of questions for dialogue aimed at working toward organizational change. The questions were based on earlier research that identified organizational factors that were experienced by burned out workers (Arches, 1994; 1991). These broad areas were: decision-making, labor processes, bureaucratization, and the extent to which participants perceive burnout to be a private or public issue.

While Arches' primary purpose for identifying these areas may have been to serve as a guide for dialogue to develop an action plan, the questions reflect many of the organizational factors identified in the research literature as potential contributors to burnout. Consequently, these questions were used to develop the data collection instruments for this study.

Methodology

The primary purpose of this study was to examine organizational factors that are predictive of social workers' perceived level of workplace frustration, while controlling for gender, age, and field of practice. The dependent variable was workers' self evaluation of their degree of frustration with their work situation. The independent or predictor variables were the four previously described organizational factors suggested by Arches

(1997): decision-making, labor processes, bureaucratization, and the extent to which participants perceive burnout to be a private or public issue.

A Likert-scale survey instrument was developed for this study, using Arches' (1997) four broad areas as a guide. The statements asked participants to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed about each item as it related to their current work environment. Both positive and negative statements were included. For example, "I have a great deal of input into decision-making and policies that affect my work" is a positive statement about the work environment, while "I often feel that my organization's rules prevent me from working in a way that feels clinically correct" is a more negative statement about the work environment.

For the dependent variable, workplace frustration, workers were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement, "I often feel frustrated with my work situation." The instrument was pre-tested with three social work professionals to assess its reliability. Based on their comments, some of the instrument's wording was changed prior to its use.

Data were analyzed using univariate, bivariate, and multivariate statistics. Univariate and bivariate statistics were used to describe the sample and to provide descriptions of professionals' perceptions of their frustration, while multiple regression analysis was used to assess the relationship between the independent variables of participants' assessment of organizational factors in their work setting and the dependent variable of the assessment of their work frustration.

Sample

The study used a non-random sample of 141 social workers and other mental health professionals who attended one of four workshops on burnout in a Mid-western state in 2001. Approximately 250 individuals attended these four workshops, for an estimated response rate of 56%. There were more women than men in the sample, with 120, or 84% of participants being female. Participants were mostly Caucasian, as only 10% of participants were a minority. They ranged in age from 22 to 80 years with the mean age being 42. The majority of participants were MSW social

workers, as 57 or 40% had an MSW degree, while 50 or 35% had a BSW degree. The remainder of participants were other human service related professionals, including psychologists, nurses, and marriage and family therapists.

Participants also varied in their range of experience, in their practice setting, and the type of organization for which they worked. The mean number of years in practice was 10 years, ranging from one to thirty-five years. Following is the field of practices represented by these participants, listed in order of the greatest to the fewest number of participants in each field of practice: mental health (38), child welfare (28), aging (14), medical (13), and family services (9). Other fields of practice included schools, disability, substance abuse, corrections, and community organization. Almost half of the participants (64, or 45%) reported being employed by a public nonprofit agency, 52 (36%) reported being employed in a private nonprofit agency, and 15 reported being employed by a private for profit agency.

Findings

To address the main research question, the following groups of independent variables were regressed on the dependent variable of workplace frustration, while controlling for age, gender, and field of practice: decision-making, labor processes affecting clients, community, colleagues, and personal relationships; bureaucracy, and private trouble/public issue. Of these multiple regression equations, the equation including factors associated with labor processes directly affecting professionals' work with clients explained 43% of the variance in frustration, explaining the most variance of all equations tested ($F = 9.369$, $df = 10$, $p = .00$). Following this, the equation including factors examining the extent to which frustration is a private trouble or public issue explained 36% of the variance ($F = 8.12$, $df = 9$, $p = .00$). The equation focusing on bureaucratic factors explained 29% of the variance in frustration ($F = 6.569$, $df = 8$, $p = .000$). None of the control variables were significantly associated with workplace frustration in these equations, suggesting that specific organizational factors are more critical than individual characteristics and field of practice in explaining workplace frustration. Following is a more detailed

discussion of these three organizational factors that explained the most variance in workplace frustration.

Labor Processes Affecting Workers' Relationships with Clients

The equation including labor processes affecting workers' relationships with clients explained 43% of the variance in workplace frustration and was statistically significant ($F = 9.369$, $df = 10$, $p = .00$). Of the 7 factors included in the equation, three were significantly associated with workplace association. These factors are: whether case assignments are based on sound practice principles, ($B = -.240$, $t = -2.101$, $p = .036$), feeling supported by the organization in advocating for clients ($B = -.416$, $t = -4.718$, $p = .000$), and having sufficient time to spend with each client ($B = -.331$, $t = -4.373$, $p = .00$). Since the betas associated with these variables are negative, as the use of sound practice principles, support for advocating for clients, and time available for clients increased, participants' sense of frustration decreased.

Private Trouble/Public Issue

Arches (1997) stated that a public issue exists if the social structure of the workplace is negatively affecting individuals who are employed there. This equation explained 36% of the variance in workplace frustration ($F = 9.168$, $df = 8$, $p = .000$). Of the six factors included in this equation, participants' sense of isolation ($B = .226$, $t = 2.94$, $p = .004$), powerlessness ($B = -.181$, $t = -2.286$, $p = .024$), having energy for clients ($B = -.297$, $t = -2.906$, $p = .004$) and their unit ($B = .205$, $t = 2.214$, $p = .029$) were predictive of workplace frustration. Workers who feel isolated and powerlessness may perceive their troubles as a private rather than a public matter, which Arches has suggested contributes to one's sense of workplace frustration, and discourages workers from taking steps to seek organizational change.

Bureaucratic Paperwork and Rules

While the equation focusing on bureaucratic factors explained 29% of the variance in frustration ($F = 6.569$, $df = 8$, $p = .000$), only the extent to which participants felt burdened by paperwork ($B = .263$, $t = 2.84$, $p = .005$) and constricted by their organization's rules ($B = .34$, $t = 3.57$, $p = .000$) contributed to explaining the variance in

frustration, findings that are supported in the literature (Gomez, 1995; Crotty, 1999).

Summary of Findings

This study supports previous research that links organizational factors to workers' self reports of frustration, and challenges some of the research attributing burnout to individual characteristics, such as age and gender. For example, participants were concerned about paperwork and rules, which can affect the quality of services clients receive. While frustration did differ by gender and field of practice in the bivariate analyses, they were not predictive of frustration when taking specific organizational factors into account in the multivariate analyses. Further, general wisdom regarding burnout suggests that staff experience burnout when work affects them personally. In contrast, these findings suggest that participants were most frustrated when organizational factors affected clients and were less concerned when it affected them as individual employees.

Limitations

This study is limited by both its sampling procedures, and by allowing workers' to self-report their level of frustration. The absence of random sampling suggests that findings cannot be generalized beyond participants in this study. Additionally, it is not possible to assess the extent to which participation in the workshop impacted participants' decision to participate and their actual responses on the survey. For example, workshop attendees who were feeling a degree of frustration may have been more motivated to complete the survey than attendees who were feeling relatively satisfied with their work experience. It is also not possible to assess whether participants are experiencing burnout, since the survey asks for them to self-report their level of workplace frustration. However, it should be noted that burnout is expressed in terms of frustration, when individuals are asked to self report (Keenan & Newton, 1984).

Implications

These findings support previous research that organizational factors contribute to the development of frustration, and perhaps

to burnout (Arches, 1997, Jayaratne, et.al., 1991). Both organizational support (Jayaratne, Davis-Sacks, & Chess, 1991) and control (Himle, Jayaratne, & Thyness, 1989), the inverse of powerlessness, have been associated with decreasing worker stress. Since participants report that factors influencing service quality impacts their workplace frustration, social workers and other helping professionals should reflect on the relationship between workplace conditions that contribute to their own frustration and the quality of services they deliver.

To address workplace frustration, social service administrators could consider empowerment strategies for managing their organizations (Gutierrez, GlenMaye, and DeLois, 1995). Supervisors could engage their staff in a dialogue to suggest improvements that could decrease workplace frustration. These discussions should include both work conditions and ways the organization can improve services. Administrators could also seek opportunities for increased consumer feedback. Strategies that serve to empower clients could have the added benefit of providing a more rewarding work environment for staff. Such an organizational approach to address burnout may be a significant shift in focus from emphasizing individual stress management techniques. Working toward organizational change in collaboration with clients may be a more potent antidote to the sense of isolation and powerlessness than individualized approaches alone, since going it alone may inadvertently reinforce one's sense of isolation and powerlessness.

Finally, future research should not only examine the organizational factors identified in this study, but should also assess the relationship between working conditions and service delivery outcomes. Rather than focusing on the difficulties of frustration and burnout only, research should also study job satisfaction among social workers and other social service professionals. Such research should use standardized instruments to measure job satisfaction so that findings can be compared across settings. This research would provide insight into what is going well in social service agencies, and which type of agencies, or settings, are most successful in creating an agency environment that both clients and staff experience as empowering.

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