

Beyond Burnout: Understanding Social Workers' Sense of Effectiveness in Psychiatric Rehabilitation

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Statement of the Research Problem

The changing nature of work with people who have severe mental illness raises important workplace issues in the field of mental health (Windle et al., 1988). As services to consumers continue to change along with the implementation of health care reform, policy-makers predict that these workers will be helping more acutely disabled consumers in the community as cost-saving measures are implemented such as fewer and shorter hospital stays (Hadley et al., 1992; Johnson, 1990).

Research about workers who provide these services focuses primarily on worker burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1982; Penn, et al., 1988) instead of how to promote well-being and effectiveness in light of the demands of community care. Understanding the nature of social workers' sense of effectiveness with consumers and how characteristics of the job and workplace relationships explain this effectiveness is the focus of this study.

Research Background

The chronic mental illness treatment literature illuminates some of the expectations placed on social workers in the field (Hogarty, et al., 1979; Stein & Test, 1980; Anthony & Farkas, 1982; Witheridge, 1990), such as an understanding of how to engage people with severe mental illnesses in vocational rehabilitation: helping them manage medication and its side effects; working with family members to better understand the illness and its vicissitudes; and how to coordinate services and resources in fragmented delivery systems.

The job characteristics literature identifies aspects of work which shape the quality of workers' lives influencing their sense of effectiveness such as their ability to make their own treatment decisions, feel challenged by their work and feel rewarded for the work they do (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Kohn, 1977; Buffum, 1981; Lambert, 1991).

The literature on workplace relationships suggests that the more workers perceive supportive working relationships with their supervisors and co-workers and clients, the more they are committed to organizational goals and feel fortified to carry out work tasks (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cherniss, 1984; Leete, 1984; Anthony et al., 1983).

Questions/Hypotheses

Although the literature does not specifically address social workers' self-perceived effectiveness in the severe mental illness area, there are several literatures which help inform

a framework to understand 1) What comprises social workers sense of effectiveness in their work with consumers? 2) What aspects of workers' jobs help explain their sense of effectiveness?

Methodology

This cross-sectional case study (Eisenhardt, 1991) was conducted at the Thresholds Psychiatric Rehabilitation Center in Chicago, Illinois, an award-winning organization providing vocational training, housing, and social activities, as well as an assertive case management program.

From a series of focus group discussions, three dimensions of events consumers achieve which promote workers' sense of effectiveness were identified. These (dependent variables) were: gaining self esteem and empowerment, achieving Thresholds' goals, and establishing or maintaining relationships (16 items). A questionnaire asking workers how important events in these different categories were to their sense of effectiveness and also with how many members they could reasonably expect these events to happen (thinking of the members they worked with in the last year) was developed. Measures of existing scales to estimate convergent and discriminant validity were applied.

For a comprehensive measure of the context in which workers carry out their work (independent variables), a variety of existing scales were used. The Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (MOAQ) measured workers' job characteristics of autonomy, stress, safety, pay, and challenge as well as a variety of aspects of workplace relationships with coworkers and supervisors such as competence, feedback and support (Seashore, Lawler et al., 1986) In addition, workers' attitudes about job safety (Jermier, 1987) and Perceived Organizational Support (Eisenberger, 1986) were adapted to reflect workers' ideas about their work culture and environment. Items from focus groups in all of these measures to make the questionnaire as relevant as possible to workers were added. For example, a set of items examining the support and feedback workers receive from consumers, as well as their perceptions of client functioning and safety issues, was developed.

Entry-level workers in all areas of Thresholds were surveyed as were their immediate supervisors. Supervisors at this level in the organization spend a majority of their time working with consumers. The response rate was 76 per cent (N=157). Only 20 men were in the obtained sample; they were excluded from the analysis for homogeneity.

After describing the sample, MANOVA and multiple least square regressions were performed to understand how characteristics of the workplace help explain workers' perceived effectiveness.

Results

As indicated from the qualitative information, multiple client outcomes or "markers" comprise workers' sense of effectiveness, from consumers maintaining housing placements, to making friends and being able to take initiative. The descriptive analysis reveals overall, that the sorts of outcomes workers feel are meaningful to their sense of effectiveness have as

much to do with consumers gaining self-esteem and having a sense of personal efficacy, as achieving agency goals of housing, medication compliance and avoiding rehospitalization. These self-esteem markers are certainly not incongruent with the goals that agency workers strive for. However, as is true within many case management models for the severely disabled, the wider mission is to provide consumers with basic necessities and not to provide therapy as it is meant in the traditional sense. The findings also revealed that self-esteem markers occur with the fewest consumers while the events which happen more were housing placements, stabilizing on medication, and feeling part of the Thresholds community.

The results from the regression analyses indicate that the more challenging workers jobs were, the more effective workers perceived themselves to be. Other job characteristics, such as worker perceived stress and safety issues were not related to worker perceived effectiveness. In terms of workplace relationships, the more workers perceived their organization to be supportive of them, the more effective they felt. Another important finding in this study was that workers feel supported by the consumers with whom they work and this support significantly contributed to the effectiveness model. Workers who perceive their members to be more disabled perceived themselves to be less effective. But, even after controlling for disability, support from members was still significant.

Utility for Social Work Practice

The findings suggest that the most important variable explaining workers' perceived effectiveness was the degree to which workers felt supported by the organization and the consumers they work with. This suggests that organizations should enhance workers' perceptions of effectiveness by creating work climates in which workers feel acknowledged, feel their goals and values are strongly considered, and feel their complaints are heard. Moreover, the data suggest that the more organizations can design jobs which foster worker/consumer collaboration, forming healthy working partnerships, the more workers will feel effective.

Workplace research helps open the "black box" of service delivery to consumers with mental illness. By understanding to a greater degree the structures and processes of work in organizations serving this population, we can continue to fine tune interventions while strengthening workers' sense of effectiveness.

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