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Why Social Workers Remain in the Field: An Exploratory Study on the Protective Factors Associated with Social Worker Perseverance

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Why Social Workers Remain in the Field: An Exploratory Study on the Protective
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MSW Clinical Research Paper

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for
MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St.
Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is
conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate
facility with basic social research methods. Students must
independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a
research design that is approved by a research committee and
the university Institutional Review Board, implement the
project, and publicly present their findings. This project is
neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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Abstract

Social workers face many challenges and hardships throughout their careers. This study examines the numerous stressors that social work professionals come in contact with on a daily basis, and explores the protective factors that provide these professionals with their drive to persevere in the face of these stressors. Data was obtained through semi-structured qualitative interviews with four professional social workers with a minimum of 15 years of experience in the social work field. Methods such as committee analysis, thematic clustering, and peer reviews were all utilized to analyze data for this study. The interviews highlighted key themes such as: career satisfaction, stressors, protective factors, the journey to a career in social work, and why social workers choose to remain in the social work field. Findings indicated that factors such as lack of resources, the "do more with less" mentality, balancing self-care and client needs, lack of co-worker support, poor management, and being a witness to the pain of others, all contribute to higher levels of social worker stress. Findings also indicated a number of protective factors that social workers report help to reduce the impacts of stress in their careers such as self-care, work diversity, worker autonomy, work with clients and problem solving, job security, and alternative work fantasies.

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Section

Why Social Workers Remain in the Field: An Exploratory Study on the Protective

Factors Associated with Social Worker Perseverance

The social work field is not for the faint of heart. Those who choose the

profession can look forward to long hours, little pay, and both physical and emotional

hardships. For example, Bradley and Sutherland (1995) reported that of 67 social

workers, emotional exhaustion was a real problem for more than 30% of respondents.

Emotional exhaustion was reported to decrease workers' ability to cope with work

demands and, as a result, increased workers' stress level (Bradley & Sutherland, 1995;

Evans et al. 2006). Evans et al. (2006) reported that along with high levels of stress and

emotional exhaustion, 47% of mental health social workers surveyed in England and

Wales demonstrated signs associated with significant psychological problems and

distress. Gillen (2008) even reported that social work respondents expressed physical

complaints such as headaches and stomach trouble attributed to work-related stress in

social work.

As past research has demonstrated, social work is a challenging profession. With

such overwhelming evidence of the negative factors associated with the social work field,

the question stands, why would anyone choose to remain in the social work profession?

Exploring the answer to this question will provide valuable insight into protective factors

that buffer social workers from the hardships attributed to the field of social work. As a

result of this insight, young men and women considering a career in social work may

even find the courage to say yes to the field, despite its many challenges.

Literature Review

The majority of professionals in the social work field do not acquire fame or fortune. Instead, social workers have acquired large caseloads, limited resources, and meager pay. With these less than desired "benefits" obtained along with a career in social work, why do social workers choose to remain in the social work field? A review of the past literature on social workers' job satisfaction, stress and burnout, and protective factors will provide an appropriate frame of reference for this exploratory study.

Social Worker's Satisfaction with their Careers

Research has shown that the majority of social workers tend to have high instances of job satisfaction (Evans et al. 2006; Gibson, McGrath, & Reid, 1989; Papadaki & Papadaki, 2006). Evans et al. (2006) reported that of 237 mental health social workers in England and Wales 47% stated that they were at least mostly satisfied with their jobs and only 19% reported being dissatisfied. Similar findings were reported by Papadaki and Papadaki (2006) after surveying 61 social workers from Crete, Greece. Of the social workers from Crete, 1.6% were extremely satisfied with their jobs, 46% were very satisfied, 37.7 were moderately satisfied, and only 18% reported being only somewhat satisfied. Gibson et al. (1989) also reported that out of 176 Northern Ireland field social workers, only 9% stated that they found their jobs to be either dissatisfying or very dissatisfying. In addition to these findings, almost 70% of American social workers reported their plans to remain in their current employment for the next two years (The Center for Health Workforce Studies and National Association of Social Workers Center for Workforce Studies [CHW,NASW], 2006). Papadaki and Papadaki (2006) also supported the reports of high levels of job satisfaction by stressing how more than half of

their respondents reported that they would choose their same job if given the opportunity to start any new career of their choice.

Even with high reports of job satisfaction there are at times conflicting reports. Gibson et al. (2006) revealed that when social workers were asked about job satisfaction in general terms they reported job satisfaction was high. When questioned about specific aspects of social work, respondents brought up a multitude of concerns that seemed to uncover lower rates of job satisfaction. Papadaki and Papadaki (2006) reported similar findings, but attributed lower satisfaction in terms of organizational factors within the workplace, instead of relating their findings to lower job satisfaction. Gibson et al. (1989) also reported that although more than half of the 176 respondents reported high levels of job satisfaction, 73% had considered ending their current social work positions, half of them had contemplated leaving their current jobs within the past year.

Stress and Burnout Definitions and Scales

Job stress and burnout are real concerns for workers in the social work field. Stress is defined as "a state of mental or emotional strain or suspense" (Webster's, n.d.), and burnout is defined as "a psychological syndrome that involves a prolonged response to stressors in the workplace. Specifically, it involves the chronic strain that results from an incongruence, or misfit, between the worker and the job" (Maslach, 2003, p. 189). Stress and burnout are a dangerous combination when examining job retention in the social work field (Kim and Stoner, 2008). Social workers who experience role-related stress are more likely to experience burnout, and workers who experience burnout have reported higher intentions of resigning from social work (Kim & Stoner, 2008; Soderfeldt, Soderfeldt, & Warg, 1995). The term "burnout" was first used in a human

services setting by Herbert Freudenberger. He applied the term to describe the overall

appearance of volunteers' psychological states while working in alternative health

agencies. Before Freudenberger, the term burnout typically referred to the effects of

persons with a history of chronic drug abuse (Freudenberger, 1975).

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is one of the most utilized tools in

measuring staff burnout in a wide variety of occupations (Maslach, 2003). The first MBI

was designed for workers in the human services and health care fields and consisted of

three subscales that made up the different characteristics of the burnout syndrome. The

three subscales were emotional exhaustion (being emotionally drained and fatigued by

one's work), depersonalization (feeling detached and impersonal toward clients), and

personal accomplishment (feeling competent and successful in one's work with clients)

(Gibson et al. 1998; Maslach, 2003). Another version of the MBI has been revised to

widen its occupational application and now includes the three subscales of overwhelming

exhaustion, feelings of cynicism, and feeling a lack of accomplishment or feeling

ineffective in one's work (Maslach, 2003).

Factors Leading to Stress and Burnout

Papadaki and Papadaki (2006) reported that the main sources of lower ratings on

job satisfaction for social workers were attributed to different organizational and extrinsic

work aspects. Lack of good supervision, limited opportunities for promotion, limited or

inadequate resources to meet client needs, and salary were all reported to contribute to

lower levels of job satisfaction.

Past research has also reported numerous factors that lead to stress and burnout.

These factors include areas such as lack of quality supervision, low social support, poor

management, heavy caseloads, negative work environment, poor communication between managers and staff, the bureaucracy and paperwork involved in working with clients, and worker safety (Balloch et al. 1998; Bradley & Sutherland, 1995; Brodie, 1998; Evans et al. 2006; Kim & Stoner, 2008; Morazes, Benton, Clark, & Jacquet, 2010).

  Supervision and social support. Morazes et al. (2010) asked social workers to explain the reasons behind leaving the social work field. Numerous respondents reported that they perceived a lack of support and respect from co-workers and supervisors. These findings are similar to those of Kim and Stoner (2008) who also reported that a lack of social support led to higher intentions of worker turnover. Koeske and Koeske (1989) reported that low social support, especially from co-workers, was the largest contributing factor for worker burnout.

  Strong social support from co-workers and supervisors provide a workplace in which people can thrive. A workplace where co-workers are happy, provide comfort, and share praise can increase productivity and create a sense of belonging. If there is a lack of social support and positive connections, workers lose the qualities attributed to their ability to thrive (Maslach et al. 2001). In addition to these findings, Gillen (2008) stressed the benefits of supervisors creating a safe time and place for workers to have the opportunity to vent their frustrations and concerns about current cases.

  Work environment and management. Managers have an effect on the work environment of an agency. For example, Maslach et al. (2001) stressed the importance of fairness in the workplace. Managers have the power to distribute workload, resolve conflicts, evaluate workers, and award promotions. If workers begin to perceive biases or favoritism by managers in the workplace, tensions between staff members, as well as

between staff and management, will rise. Maslach et al. (2001) went on to point out that when workers perceive biases in management they begin to feel emotionally upset, exhausted, and cynical about the workplace, all of which have been reported to lead to worker burnout (Maslach, 2003; Maslach et al. 2001). Bradley and Sutherland (1995) also pointed out how time pressures and lack of feedback on staff performance are another way in which managers can adversely affect the workplace environment.

Work environments that provide insufficient resources to provide adequate services to clients have also been reported as stress inducing for social workers (Balloch et al. 1998; Bradley & Sutherland, 1995). The effects of inadequate resources, increasing job demands, excessive paperwork, and decreased worker autonomy have all contributed to the stress and strains felt by social workers currently working in the field (Evans et al. 2006; Kim & Stoner, 2008; Maslach et al. 2001). Respondents from a recent study (CHW, NASW, 2006) reported that over a two-year span they experienced increases in multiple areas of social work such as severity of client problems, paperwork, caseload sizes, and inappropriate task assignments that do not involve social work-type tasks.

Role conflict and role ambiguity have also been associated with social worker burnout (Maslach et al. 2001; Um & Harrison, 1998). Role conflict occurs when there are conflicting job demands for a single worker (Maslach et al. 2001). Role ambiguity refers to when a worker cannot do a sufficient job due to either a lack of information or an uncertainty about job duties and demands (Maslach et al. 2001; Um & Harrison, 1998).

Social worker safety. Concern for one's safety is another factor that is associated with stress in the social work field. Two studies discussed the impact of stress

and the dangers of working in social work. Balloch et al. (1998) reported that of 1276

respondents split into four work groups (managers, social work staff, homecare workers,

and residential staff) social workers were found to be second in workers experiencing

some sort of physical attack while on the job. Results indicated that of the social work

respondents 23% reported being physically attacked, 46% reported experiencing threats

of violence, and 71% reported being shouted at or insulted while working with clients. In

support of Balloch et al's. (1998) findings, another survey reported that almost half of

social worker respondents expressed concern for their personal safety in regard to their

work duties (CHW, NASW, 2006).

Protective Factors

Along with simple responses as to why social workers remain in the field, past

research has also revealed a number of protective factors that act as buffers against the

effects of worker stress and burnout and help keep social workers in the field. Factors

such as perception of self-worth and work with clients, social support, work environment,

and coping/skills training have all been studied in past literature.

Perception of self-worth and work with clients. A Social worker's perspective

on self-worth and work with clients has also been reported as a factor in higher levels of

job satisfaction. Collins et al., (2010) reported that almost every one of the 76 social

work students in his research saw themselves as "a person of worth." The students also

reported enjoying the time they had to work directly with clients. Collins et al., (2010)

reported that instead of feeling anxious or drained by working directly with clients,

students expressed feelings of excitement and exhilaration. Licensed social workers who

have had more time in the field also reported enjoying their achievements with clients,

especially when considering their ability to address the complex social problems that

their clients are struggling with (CHW, NASW, 2006).

Social support. In past literature, social support was the most widely studied

factor associated with job satisfaction and stress. Social support is considered to be one

of the primary buffers standing between social workers and burnout (Maslach, 2001).

The importance of social support from all types of sources such as co-workers (Gibson et

al. 1989; Koeske & Koeske, 1989; Um & Harrison, 1998), supervisors (Collins, 2008;

Gibson et al. 1989), family members, friends, and support groups (Collins, 2008; Collins

et al. 2010) have been shown to decrease job stressors and increase job satisfaction.

Carver, Shreier, and Weintraub, (1989) stressed two main reasons for workers to seek out

social support; instrumental reasons such as seeking professional advice, asking for help,

or seeking knowledge and emotional reasons such as seeking sympathy, emotional

support, or understanding. Collins (2008) described similar forms of support but instead

used the terms formal and informal support.

Although Carver et al. (1989) agreed that social support is an important factor in

reducing burnout and increasing job satisfaction, they also stressed the possible harmful

effects of too much support. Staff members over utilizing coping strategies such as

ventilation or gaining sympathy, instead of focusing on working through and getting

beyond challenges, could run the risk of getting stuck in their emotional distress.

Work environment and supervision. Social workers consistently report high

levels of stress associated with their job roles. While stress levels are high and have been

associated with job turnover, a supportive working environment has been reported to

combat the negative effects of stress and help social workers to remain dedicated to their

careers (Kim & Stoner, 2008). Morazes et al. (2010) reported similar findings after comparing social workers who had either decided to stay or leave the social work field. The "stayers" were more likely to report a positive work environment, while "leavers" reported a lack of support within their previous work settings.

Supervision and management that centers on support also has been recognized to increase worker satisfaction and reduce the effects of a stress and burnout (Morazes et al. 2010). In support of this research, Gibbs (2001) reported that some social workers recall the lasting effects of early positive supervisory experiences. These early experiences helped supervisees to cope with the constant stress and workloads of their social work careers years after ending supervision with that particular supervisor. Weinbach and Taylor (2011) stressed the importance of supportive supervision for people who work in human services organizations. Due to the intense forms of tension and stressors that human service professionals come into contact with (child protection cases, working with clients with terminal illness, and investigating claims of violence within families), supervisors' emotional support for their employees has been shown to help workers to continue their job duties without being overwhelmed by the inherent tension and stressors that comes with working in the human services field (Weinbach & Taylor, 2011).

Quality management was also reported as a strong protective factor for keeping social workers from leaving the social work field. Elpers and Westhuis (2008) stressed that a positive relationship between a manager and an employee has shown to have a positive impact not only on job satisfaction, but on productivity and agency commitment as well. Managers providing resources such as accurate feedback on staff performance, enough worker autonomy to help clients, and opportunities for personal and professional

growth have also been associated with increasing staff morale as well as staff longevity

(Elpers & Westhuis, 2008; Maslach et al. 2001; Morazes et al. 2010). Collins (2008) and

Gibson et al. (1989) stressed similar factors associated with worker satisfaction and

retention along with others such as providing necessary resources to meet client needs,

higher salaries, and manageable workloads.

      Skills training and coping strategies. Creating opportunities for higher levels of

education and training have been reported as effective strategies for empowering social

workers and reducing stress (Cohen & Gagin, 2005; Collins, 2008; Morazes et al. 2010).

Um and Harrison (1998) also reported that workers who utilized learned coping strategies

experienced less job dissatisfaction in the workplace. After speaking with experienced

social workers Gillen (2008) argued that social workers can protect their own health and

well being by accepting the fact that they cannot always operate at 100%. This strategy

highlights that social workers have their limits, and understanding those limits while in

the service of clients is important.

      Maslach and Goldberg (1998) discussed the impracticality of most training

research due to its tendency to center on teaching individuals how to improve their

internal resources for dealing with stress. Many stressors do not come from the inside,

but instead come from conflicting organizational factors such as work environment,

supervision, and management (Maslach, 2001; Morazes et al. 2010). Maslach and

Goldberg (1998) hypothesized that training and educating people may not be as effective

as training and educating organizations, but it is much cheaper.

      Although research has demonstrated the benefits of utilizing coping strategies in

dealing with stress, not all strategies are seen as beneficial. Carver et al. (1989) described

two coping strategies that may serve to harm rather than benefit those who use them. The first strategy is called behavioral disengagement, and is described as reducing a person's effort or direct contact with stress-related tasks. The second strategy, called mental disengagement, is when a person engages in mental avoidance activities such as alcohol and drug abuse, day dreaming, and excessive sleeping to distract their minds from different stress-related activities. Gibson (1989) supports these findings and also reported that 61% of his social work respondents admitted to avoiding stressful tasks at work, by focusing on simpler and less stress inducing activities.

Why Social Workers Remain

When social workers are questioned about why they stay in social work a number of themes are reported. Gibbs (2001) stated social workers stay in the social work field due to the joy of facing new challenges on a daily basis. Gibbs (2001) also argued that those social workers who see their work as having value and improving the community as a whole were likely to find satisfaction in their work and continue their careers. In support of Gibbs (2001), Maslach et al. (2001) hypothesized that those who view their work as important are better able to take on heavier caseloads. In addition to feeling as if one is making a difference, Morazes et al. (2010) also reported other reasons such as a stable salary, benefits, and job flexibility as to why social workers choose to remain in the social work profession. On a different note, Otkay (1992) claimed that feeling challenged, excited, and fulfilled in one's work was paramount to work longevity.

Summary

Past research has centered on different risks and protective factors associated with a career in the social work field, but few have sought the guidance of seasoned social

workers specifically. Social workers who have remained in the field in spite of all of its transitional ups and downs over the years could provide invaluable insight into the factors that could help to inspire less experienced social workers to endure in such a challenging field. This is why understanding the factors that have given other, long-standing, social work professionals the strength to continue their service to clients is an important area of research that needs to be explored.

Conceptual Framework

To better understand why social workers choose to remain in the field of social work, despite its obvious stressors and challenges, the use of the ecological model seems to provide a useful vantage point. The ecological perspective focuses on key themes such as reciprocity, person:environment fit, adaptation, stressors, coping, and habitat, all of which provide insight into why social workers choose to remain in the field (Gitterman & Germain, 2008a).

Gitterman and Germain (2008b) stressed the importance of reciprocity in the ecological perspective by stating that "ecological thinking focuses on the reciprocity of person-environment exchanges, in which each shapes and influences the other over time" (p. 53). In other words, the ecological perspective examines the big picture and posits that people can affect their environment, while the environment can also have an effect on people. Rather than simply focusing on either people or the environment, the ecological perspective focuses on the relationship between people and their environment.

Person:environment fit is another important theme in the ecological perspective. Some authors refer to this theme as the "goodness-of-fit" between people and their environment (Miley, O'Melia, & Dubois, 2011). A "good fit" develops when people

perceive that their personal and environmental resources are sufficient to promote personal growth and wellbeing (Gitterman and Germain, 2008b). When people feel as if there is a "good fit" between themselves and the environment, they feel protected and competent. These positive emotions can lead a person to developing the skill of adaptation (Dubos, 1968; Gitterman & Germain, 2008b). Gitterman and Germain (2008b) defined adaptation as "actions designed to achieve personal change, environmental change, or both in order to improve the level of person:environment fit" (p. 55). For example, when social workers have quality supervision and managers who support them, they may feel a higher level of confidence and as a result are able to adapt to the high levels of stress in their work. On the other hand, if people do not perceive a "good fit" with their environment, they perceive that there is a lack of personal and environmental resources to adequately meet their needs. Over a period of time, this perceived lack of resources can lead to stress (Gitterman & Germain, 2008b; Miley et al. 2011). Past research reported that social workers often perceive a lack of resources such as social support, necessary funding to provide adequate services to clients, and quality supervision, as a challenging and stress-inducing part of the social work profession (Balloch et al. 1998; Kim & Stoner, 2008). The lack of a "good fit" between social workers and their work environments helps to explain the high levels of stress that social workers often experience while working in the social work field.

Handling stress in varying situations is typically done in two very different ways according to the ecological perspective. If people perceive a lack of resources needed to deal with stress, their perception of a stressor may continue to harm their emotional, psychological, and even physical wellbeing (Gitterman & Germain, 2008a; Gitterman &

Germain, 2008b). On the other hand, when people do feel as if they have the necessary

resources to deal with stress, they may view a stress-inducing activity as an obstacle that

can be overcome. The knowledge and ability to overcome difficult obstacles is then

generalized to other stress-related areas and a sense of control and confidence is the result

(Gitterman & Germain, 2008b).

 The ability to handle stressful situations is related to a person's ability to cope.

Gitterman and Germain (2008b) defined coping as "behavioral and cognitive measures to

change some aspect of oneself, the environment, the exchanges between them, or all three

in order to manage the negative feelings aroused" (p. 63). Personal resources that are

used to cope have more to do with a person's internal emotional and reasoning skills. For

example, a person's sense of motivation, problem-solving skills, relational skills, and

self-esteem are considered to be personal resources that are used to cope with stress.

Environmental resources are also used to deal with stress and are split into formal

networks such as private organizations and community outreach programs and informal

networks such as co-workers, friends, and family members (Gitterman & Germain,

2008a; Gitterman & Germain, 2008b). Coping strategies are developed in order to deal

with the negative consequences of stress. As stress is commonly reported as part of a

career in social work, understanding the ecological perspective on coping provides

insight on why social workers use different protective factors in order to buffer

themselves against stress related consequences such as burnout and worker turnover

(Morazes et al. 2010).

 The last major ecological theme that relates to this study is habitat. A person's

habitat is defined by Forte (2007) as "places in the ecosystem where particular organisms

live and act" (p. 146). In other words, a habitat can consist of any area where a person

routinely interacts. Social workers' habitats could be their home, workplace, or even a

park that they visit (Forte, 2007; Gitterman & Germain, 2008b). In a supportive and safe

habitat, people will continue to feel confident and experience personal growth in both

their relationships and work, but if a habitat does not provide a positive environment it

can result in people feeling alone and disconnected from others (Gitterman & Germain,

2008b). For example the ecological model would suggest that if social workers do not

experience the support of their peers and supervisors in their workplace, their habitat is

not providing them with the necessary provisions to succeed.

Due to the focus on the reciprocal nature of people and their environments, along

with other key themes such as person:environment fit, adaptation, stressors, coping, and

habitat, the ecological model provides an enlightening view into the lives of social

workers and the challenges they face while attempting to persevere in such a challenging

field.

Method

A qualitative interview was chosen to explore the question, why do social workers

choose to remain in the social work field? A qualitative interview was chosen for this

study due to the exploratory nature of the question being asked. The importance of

exploring respondents' subjective experiences related to factors such as job satisfaction,

job stress, and protective factors were the main focus of this research (Berg, 2009).   The

reason for choosing a qualitative over a quantitative method of acquiring information was

because a quantitative method would not allow the freedom necessary to fully explore the

richness of respondents' subjective experiences (Monnette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011).

Sample

The sample for this study was a non-probability sample of convenience. The researcher acquired names of potential participants through members of the research committee associated with this study. The researcher attempted to recruit ten professional social workers from a variety of social work professions, but was only able to acquire four. The sample for this study consisted of two women and two men. Each respondent had at least 15 years of experience in the social work field. The four respondents were employed in the following areas of social work: hospital social work, community outreach, crisis intervention, case management, teaching, and therapy.

Instruments

The research instrument used for this study was a semi-standardized interview consisting of eight open-ended qualitative questions. The interview was semi-standardized meaning that the researcher created pre-determined questions and asked them in a specific order. The semi-standardized interview allowed the researcher to skip questions if the respondent had already answered them earlier in the interview and also allowed the researcher to ask the respondent to elaborate on answers if their meanings were unclear (Berg, 2009).

The following questions were used for the interview: 1) What made you decide to become a social worker? 2) What aspects of your work do you find to be especially rewarding? 3) What have you found to be most challenging about being a social worker? 4) What areas of your work would you say cause you the most stress? 5) What factors either in or outside the workplace help you in overcoming the stressors that you face in your work. 6) If you could change anything about your current employment to help

support you in your job duties, what would you change? 7) I know from an earlier question why you decided to become a social worker. Now, years later, after all of the positive and negative experiences that you have had, can you tell me why you have chosen to remain in the social work field? 8) If you could go back and do it all over again, would you still choose social work as your profession? Why or why not?

These questions seemed to be reliable for answering the question of why social workers choose to remain in the social work field. The questions were reviewed by three different student researchers in order to test for their reliability. In each case, the student researchers were able to clearly answer each of the questions with no need for clarification. This provides support for the reliability of the questions that were used for the qualitative interview. Each of these questions' validity seemed strong. The questions were created after researching past literature on the topic of social work career satisfaction, worker stress, and burnout, and then pulling out themes on the protective factors associated with career satisfaction and longevity. Second, the questions seemed to have strong face validity due to the topics such as work satisfaction, work stress, support systems, and why each social worker respondent had personally chosen to remain in the field, all of which were reported on in past literature. Last, the questions were reviewed by the research chair, two committee members, and two student researchers, who all agreed to read and suggest additional changes where appropriate. All required changes were then made and verified by the research chair.

Human Subjects and Safeguards

Respondents were safeguarded in numerous ways for this research project. First, respondent confidentiality was maintained and no data collected or published was linked

to respondents in any way. In an attempt to further protect respondents' identities, the researcher also randomly changed pronouns such as he, she, him, and her while writing up this study. In addition to confidentiality, all recorded interviews and transcripts were stored on a password protected computer and will be destroyed within two years of when the data is collected. Each participant also received a copy of the consent form and was given an opportunity to ask about any questions or concerns they had about participating in the research project. Respondents had the right to refuse to answer any question during the interview and could withdraw from the study up until a week after the interview. If a respondent chose to withdraw from the study any and all of the data collected about the respondent was not utilized in the final paper. Last, this study was also be approved by the St. Thomas University's institutional review board to ensure the safety of respondents before any data was collected.

Procedures

Four individual interviews were conducted to gather information for this study. Two of the interviews took place at the Summit Classroom Building on the University of St. Thomas's campus located in St. Paul, MN. The other two interviews took place at the participants' places of work. All interviews were conducted in private offices where respondent confidentiality could be protected. The interviews were audio-recorded, lasted between 25-45 minutes, and consisted of eight open-ended questions exploring respondents' experiences of career satisfaction, protective factors, and stress associated with a career in the social work. Each interview was then transcribed and coded by the researcher.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were created by the researcher by listening to audio-recordings of the interviews and typing the content of the interviews word for word. The researcher utilized a coding scheme that identified no prior themes before evaluating the data. Key themes emerged as the data was collected and reviewed (Monette, Sulivan, and DeJong, 2011). Key themes that emerged from the transcripts were identified by the researcher after evaluating each interview. Themes were identified by writing notes in margins and highlighting the potential themes of each interview. Similar emerging themes were then placed under broad categories that were later re-evaluated by the researcher after coding for each interview had been completed.

Findings

A number of important themes emerged from the qualitative interviews focusing on social workers' experiences of stressors, protective factors, and satisfaction throughout their careers. The emerging themes included: career satisfaction, stressors, protective factors, the journey to a career in social work, and why social workers choose to remain in the social work field.

Career Satisfaction

Of the four respondents in this study, only one responded that he would "unequivocally" choose social work again if given the chance to go back and choose a new profession, although all four of the respondents expressed satisfaction with their careers as social workers. Two respondents also believed that they could have found "equally rewarding" work in other professions. One respondent stated:

I don't look back and think oh I definitely should have done something

differently. I look back and think there are other things I could have done that

would have been cool too, but not that I should have done that (another

profession) because this (social work) didn't work out.

A number of respondents expressed how they have grown more appreciative of a career

in social work as they have gotten older. Two respondents spoke about the reality of age

discrimination and how social workers seemed less likely to be targeted by their agencies

due to their age. One social worker who had been in the field for over 30 years

remarked:

I have become much more appreciative of my job over the last decade than I had

been in the past because I know guys my age that have been laid off from

different areas of work and that would terrify me.

Social work benefits. Although one respondent remarked, "It (social work)

generally doesn't pay well," other social work benefits such as job security, reasonable

vacation time, and flexible schedules were all reported as factors that contributed to

social worker's higher levels of career satisfaction. As one social worker said "I've never

been laid off, and I want to say damn near 99% of the time I've got my vacation time

when I've requested it. How many people can say that over the course of 30 years?"

Regrets. Respondents often looked back at the option to have a "do over" on

their careers by asking themselves if they had any regrets for choosing social work.

Although only one social worker answered a definite "yes" to choosing social work

again, not one respondent expressed any regrets about becoming a social worker. This

was a revelation for one respondent who at first doubted that social work was a good choice when he came to this realization:

> You know, I don't wake up every morning saying I wish I would have done this (indicating a different profession). I might wake up saying God what the hell should I have done with my life? But I don't have anything that I'm regretting that I didn't get into and that's positive.

Stressors

During the interview process a number of factors that contribute to social workers' experiences of stress in the social work field were reported. Factors such as lack of resources, the idea of "doing more with less," balancing self-care and client needs, dealing with the demands of a large administration, poor management, lack of co-worker support, and being a witness to the pain of others were all reported as factors contributing to experiences of stress in the field of social work.

Lack of resources. Social workers reported that many organizations lack the necessary resources to meet the needs of their clients. Resources such as funding, time spent with clients, and additional employees to lighten the workload were all said to be lacking in the social work field and thus contributed to social workers' experiences of stress. One respondent replied "hey if we had all the money in the world we'd be thought of as great, but that doesn't happen. That causes me the most stress." Another social worker voiced his frustration over witnessing "easily fixable" problems that persist due to a lack of resources and funding when he stated, "I've worked in mental health and when you see a need and you understand that it is an easily fixable need if people could actually access it, if the resource existed, if there was funding for that resource."

Do more with less. As programs and funding continue to decline a common expectation that social workers need to "do more with less" has developed. Although social workers reported that they agree with the need to do all that they can with the resources they have, at times the "do more with less" expectation tends to label the social worker as the problem when clients do not get the services they need. One social worker described the stress caused when clients blame him for not providing services when the choice to award services is out of his control.

> Unfortunately, the other thing that I've learned in social work is that it all boils down to dollars and cents. It's that simple. So, like I said, not everybody can get it (services), and that is the tough part of the job, where you have to have some thick skin, because all of a sudden it's a shoot the messenger type of thing.

Balancing self-care and client needs. A number of social workers also explained the stress associated with the "balancing act" between providing care for clients while also allowing time for their own needs. One respondent working in a hospital setting described the guilt she felt from going home to take care of herself at the end of the day when she knew that more patients were still waiting to be seen.

> Particularly when you are working in-patient there's always somebody up there that you didn't get to and that you could, should see. Sometimes it's coming from other team members who are saying at the end of my eight hours "what this family really needs is such and such" and so the challenge for me is the balance between what I see as good self-care, and that's having a life outside of here, and meeting the needs of patients.

Some social workers reported that being busy is simply part of the job, while others believe that the demands on social workers are getting much more difficult to meet. One social worker exclaimed, "It's like what are you trying to do kill me?" referring to his ongoing work demands. He went on to explain that the longer he has worked in the social work field, the busier and more challenging the work has become.

Dealing with the demands of a larger administration. The demands and shortcomings of working within a larger administration were also described as common stressors in the social work field. Social work respondents reported that larger administrations seem to prioritize factors such as meetings, procedures, and paperwork instead of emphasizing priorities that social workers perceive as more important such as more time to spend on direct client care, networking with other agencies, and other more "social work type of jobs." One respondent who primarily worked as a case manager reflected "they (administration) are trying to do a good job, but we waste a lot of time and I think that can be said of any bureaucracy."

When social work respondents were questioned about what they would like to change in order to improve their work settings three out of the four respondents spoke about making different "administrative type" changes such as reducing unnecessary paperwork, making meetings more concentrated and efficient, and having the administration focus more time on client-care.

On the other hand, one respondent seemed overwhelmed by the idea of trying to improve the administration and believed that it was the next generation of social workers' responsibility to lead the charge for change:

I don't see how things could change, and I guess that would also cause more work

on my part. I don't want to work any harder ok? I've been doing this a long time.

Let the young folks, go get'em fellas. Charge into this century! I'll be right there

following you.

Another reported source of stress relating to working within a large administration

is when a social worker's role conflicts with the objectives of the larger organization. A

clinical social worker in a hospital setting demonstrated this when she recalled:

I've been thinking about some of the patients that I've had when there are no

good discharge alternatives or good discharge options, and they end up sitting

here and you're getting pressure from the doctors saying "he should have left two

weeks ago" or even longer.

This is a classic example of when a social worker's and an administration's definition of

client-care does not match up and in which conflict is inevitable.

Poor management. Only one respondent reported poor management as a source

of stress in the workplace. He recalled how an "us versus them mentality" developed

between himself and management when his managers continued to ignore his team's

ideas and opinions. The combative "us versus them" environment became so powerful

that at times the social worker reported sitting quietly in meetings even after being asked

for his input thinking, "you could care less about what I have to say. Your decision has

been made before you came into this meeting, so don't insult my intelligence." He also

described how excited he was to see an especially disliked manager get a promotion. "I

was the one doing cartwheels knowing that he (the manager) would be leaving!"

Lack of co-worker support. When co-worker support was lacking, a number of respondents reported feeling isolated and more stressed at work. Even though one respondent worked for a large organization with dozens of co-workers he remembered how isolated he felt when a close colleague of his left the workplace. With no perceived support from other co-workers he struggled to find enjoyment in his work. He recalled telling the other social worker, "Now with you gone I have no colleagues whatsoever."

Being a witness to the pain of others. No matter how long they have been in the field or what role a social worker found herself in, the strain of watching clients suffer seemed to be a steady source of stress. Simply being present and listening to the hardships and pain that clients go through was reported as a stressor for every respondent in this study. One respondent explained how he continues to be affected by his clients even after 30 years in the field, "when you are getting yelled at by somebody or you see a spouse crying… It still gets me. I don't care how many years, it still gets me and I wish it wasn't that way."

The last interesting finding reported was that of the four respondents in this study, three of them utilized a variation of the phase "what keeps me up at night?" when questioned about areas of stress in their work. The repeated use of such phrases demonstrates the intensity of the stressors associated with a career in the social work field.

Protective Factors

There were a large number of protective factors reported by social workers that seemed to serve as buffers for many of the stressors experienced while working in the social work field. Factors such as self-care, good boundaries, social support, work

diversity, autonomy, work with clients and problem solving, job security, and fantasies were all reported to buffer social workers from the stressors and challenges of their work.

Self-care. Many of the respondents stressed the importance of practicing good "self-care." The concept of self-care centered on doing activities that respondents enjoyed while the definition of "good self-care" changed depending on the individual who was practicing it. For example, respondents reported different self-care activities such as eating healthy, exercising, having another part-time job, practicing yoga, and spending time with family and friends.

For one respondent good self-care meant simply to be left alone at the end of the day. By the time the end of the day came around he stated, "I don't want to hear anybody!" Another respondent spoke about the importance of finding "hobbies that I can stay engaged in that are different from what I do." He continued:

> For me I've found wood working to be particularly fun. Kind of my own standing joke about that is that I can be working on something, go away for a month and a half and come back to it and nothing has changed. It's exactly how I left it. You know it's sort of like when I'm working with clients or when I'm working with students, God only knows what could have happened over the last period of time right? But a piece of wood doesn't change unless I change it.

Good boundaries. Some social workers emphasized the importance of having good boundaries as an essential protective factor against the stressors of social work. For most respondents, having good boundaries centered on two main themes. The first theme centered on the idea that you have to separate your work life from your social life. One social worker proudly claimed "I've got really good boundaries in terms of the client's

problem is not my life and my problem." Another social worker warned that sometimes

leaving the work at work is not as easy as it sounds and stated "I'm really very good

about when I leave here (work), I leave it. It wasn't always that way and I think you

work through to get to that point."

The second theme centered on the importance of knowing when to say no to the

work and when to go home. Social workers in this study repeatedly warned against the

unhealthy drive to "get it all done." One respondent explained that "sometimes I will

actually schedule appointments at the end of the day so I make sure that I get out of

here." To stress the importance of going home, another respondent explained how she

tells young social workers that "no one will die" if you can't finish everything by the end

of the day. The problem of not being able to complete every task was also why one

respondent stressed the importance of prioritizing her job duties and always making sure

that meeting the needs of clients was at the top of her list.

Social support. Social work respondents emphasized the importance of having

some form of social support while working in the social work field. Having good social

support was reported to decrease the experience of stress in the workplace while also

increasing job satisfaction. Sources such as family, friends, co-workers, and even pets

were all reported to buffer social workers from the stressors of their work. For example,

one respondent explained how "staying active in family activities" simply helped him to

forget about work for awhile. Another respondent explained how having "a team of

people who I can just go to and vent to" was especially important for him when feeling

stressed out or stuck in his work. Last, a respondent explained how having other social

workers on his team provided a special kind of support that other non-social workers did

not. He went on to explain that he had "great partnerships" with other team members, but said "they don't necessarily think like social workers," and having other social workers to "connect to" and "team up with" was a welcome source of support.

Work diversity. The opportunity to take on different roles and activities was reported to protect many social workers from getting "burned out" or "bored" with their careers. Social workers reported that having the freedom to "mix things up" was a part of the job that really helped them to stay engaged with clients and interested in their work. As one social worker explained, "what's important for me, and I learned early, is that I need diversity in my work. I cannot have just one thing because I get bored quickly." Another social work respondent described how having different roles protected him from getting burned out:

> I don't think that I could do any single role full time. So having other roles that I can do that give me an opportunity to… Ok, so I'm feeling kind of burned out over here, but God I have this to do too, so that keeps me energized and enthused which carries back to the area where I'm feeling kind of burned out.

On the other hand, another respondent explained how work diversity has its positives and negatives. She explained how she enjoys facing new challenges on a daily basis but also went on to say that "the challenge is you've got a to-do list and you may or may not get to it because every day is different. You never know what's going to happen. That's good and bad."

Work diversity also extended to being able to choose different types of career paths as a social worker. One respondent demonstrated this freedom when he explained:

I think the other thing that comes to mind is that, and I don't know if this is

intentional or just a pattern in my life but I'm finding that I am sort of reinventing

or recreating my role about every ten years. I'm not sure why it's even ten years

but that seems to be the pattern.

He further went on to explain how he had worked in an eclectic variety of social work

roles.

Worker Autonomy. Another protective factor reported by social workers was

worker autonomy. Social workers reported that they need to have the freedom and

authority to make their own decisions in order to best meet the needs of their clients. Due

to having heavy caseloads and long "to-do lists" social workers reported that the need to

be able to prioritize and choose how and when tasks will get done is of the upmost

importance. To emphasize this point, one social worker exclaimed, "I'm really lucky in

that I really can make independent decisions throughout the day as to who I see, how

many patients I'm going to see, and what I do during the day."

Work with clients and problem solving. Rather than being taxing, respondents

reported that working directly with clients was energizing and rewarding. As one

respondent put it, "I always say in my job, I go out. I go out to nursing homes. I do

home-visits. I say any day out is better than any day in!" Providing services and helping

clients problem solve was reported to be one of the most fulfilling experiences of a social

work career. Respondents explained that even well thought out plans may not always

"come together" for every client but when they do it feels great. As one social worker

expressed after a particularly challenging case came to a positive conclusion: "Ok, I'll

stay a little longer."

Job Security. Job security was another protective factor reported by social

workers. For example, not one of the respondents reported ever being unemployed or

laid off during the course of their careers. Recalling the security of their own careers

often led respondents to talk about the reality of age discrimination in the job market and

how they have witnessed similarly aged friends and colleagues losing their jobs in other

non-social work related fields. One respondent exclaimed "there shouldn't be age

discrimination, but have I got news for you!"

Although social workers reported feeling secure in the current employment, despite the

realities of age discrimination, their confidence did not extend to their ability to obtain

new employment in other organizations. One respondent explained "I would say until

relatively recently I always had the confidence that if I wanted a job I could get it."

Three out of four of respondents reported a desire to retire from their current employment

rather than facing the challenges of pursuing new employment with other organizations.

Fantasies. Throughout the interview process, a number of respondents revealed

the protective nature of fantasizing about other potential job opportunities that generally

had little to nothing to do with social work. These fantasies reportedly served as

protective factors against experiences of extreme stress. One respondent described a

fantasy that she often had while working in a particularly stressful area of social work:

> Mine (her fantasy) for a long time was that I was going to work as a grocery store
>
> checkout person because I know my fruits and vegetables. I could learn the codes
>
> on them and how hard is it to scan? I figured that my skills in terms of my social
>
> work skills and interpersonal skills were a perfect fit because you get a lot of
>
> people who come through who are grumpy. You do a little listening, but you only

have to interact with them for what five minutes max? Then you're on to the next

person who may or may not be grumpy, so my fantasy was that I was going to

become a checker at Rainbow Foods.

Other respondents described fantasies such as baking bread at a Catholic Seminary,

selling handkerchiefs at Macy's, or moving to a remote island to grow organic fruits and

vegetables. Social workers reported how fantasies often served as welcome distractions

which helped them to cope with careers that often consist of numerous stressors and

challenges.

The Journey to a Career in Social Work

The social workers interviewed in this study demonstrated that the path leading to

a career in social work is one of many twists and turns. Respondents came from very

different backgrounds and began their journeys with numerous other careers in mind.

When questioned about how they chose a career in social work, not one social worker

reported that a career in social work was part of his/her initial plans. The social workers'

answers to what made each of them choose a career in social work varied greatly from

one respondent to the next. For example, one social worker recalled how choosing a

degree in social work was a decision partially fueled by fear.

I was a junior in college. It was the end of the Vietnam War and my draft number

was 49, and back then whether it was one or 100 you were in and I was scared.

Not unpatriotic, scared. So it was kind of like I think I'll stay in school because I

really was considering dropping out.

This same respondent went on to explain that he also perceived a degree in social work as more easily attainable, thus providing enough incentive to turn away from his original interests.

Another social worker described how choosing social work was a practical decision with better opportunities for employment. "My first love was always history, but I had the good sense of saying what am I going to do with it once I'm out and I need to find something that I can actually find employment in."

Last, a social worker explained how her career choice came as a personal realization. Only after obtaining a degree unrelated to social work did the respondent come to realize that her involvement in areas such as student government and counseling did she come to understand where her true interests lay.

I was doing stuff that sort of ran parallel (to social work) but I had this other idea in mind and then finally came to the point of realizing that being in human services and then finally social work was really what I wanted to do.

Why Remain in the Social Work Field

One social worker simply stated that he chose to stay in the social work field "because it's fun!" He continued with "that's what it really boils down to. I still really like what I'm doing." Feeling as if their work has value was another important aspect that contributed to social worker longevity. For example one social worker replied:

My work has meaning. My work has satisfaction. I landed in this job which I really hope I can stay in until I do retire. It's a great job. What better way to go out? And I've done some great stuff over the years.

Last, the aspiration to be a life-long learner was reported to help social workers persevere through the emotional ups and downs of their careers. Social workers reported that having the opportunity to face new challenges and learn new things kept them excited about the profession. As one respondent put it, "if I ever get to the point where I think that I know it all, it's time to leave."

Discussion

This study focused on why social workers choose to remain in the social work field. Numerous themes emerged during this study that were similar to and in contrast of past research. Along with the similarities and differences a number of new emerging themes that were not discussed in previous literature were also discovered.

Career Satisfaction

Similar to past research (CHW, NASW, 2006; Evans et al. 2006; Gibson, McGrath, & Reid, 1989; Papadaki & Papadaki, 2006), respondents in this study reported high levels of career satisfaction.

In contrast to the high levels of career satisfaction reported by social workers in this study, three out of the four respondents were hesitant when questioned about whether or not they would choose a career in social work again if given the opportunity to go back and start over. Social workers' hesitancy as to whether or not they would choose social work again mirrored the findings of Gibson et.al (2006) who reported that social workers often report high levels of career satisfaction when questioned about their work in general terms, but revealed numerous problems and concerns that seemed to demonstrate less career satisfaction when questioned about more specific aspects of their work. In addition, Gibson et al. (2006) also reported that more than 50% of social workers

admitted to considering leaving their current social work position while simultaneously expressing high levels of satisfaction with their careers.

Stressors

One finding of this study revealed that insufficient resources such as too little time allocated for clients, lack of funding for services, and too few employees to manage workloads were all significant factors leading to higher instances of stress for social workers practicing in the field today. This is in agreement with Balloch et al. (1998), Bradley and Sutherland (1995), and Papadaki and Papadaki (2006) who reported that being unable to provide adequate services to clients due to a lack of agency resources was particularly stress inducing for social workers.

In addition to the previous findings, this study also revealed that the common occurrence of having inadequate resources has helped to foster a culture where social workers are expected to continually "do more with less." This expectation was found to place even more pressure on social workers due to the fear of being labeled inefficient or defective even when the needs of clients could not be met due to the limited resources available. Maslach et al. (2001) reported a similar conflict when describing how workers often become distressed when they feel a responsibility to provide services "to which they are deeply committed" but lack the appropriate resources to provide them.

This study also revealed that social workers experience stress when attempting to balance the needs of their clients with their own self-care. With reported increases in caseloads sizes, paperwork, and other responsibilities, social workers are working longer and harder than ever. Longer work hours result in less time for social workers to meet their own needs by practicing good self-care such as relaxing at home, going out with

friends, or spending time with family, all of which have been reported to reduce stress (Collins et al. 2008). In support of these findings, the Center for Health Workforce Studies and the National Association of Social Workers Center for Workforce Studies (2006) also reported that over the past two years social workers have experienced a noticeable increase in areas such as severity of client problems, caseload sizes, and paperwork.

Conflicting priorities between social workers and the larger agencies that they work for was also found to increase social workers levels of stress. Social workers reported how administrations often prioritize activities such as meetings, procedures, and paperwork over more important activities such as those relating to client-care. These findings are in line with Maslach et al. who reported that similar role conflicts were found to occur in agencies when seemingly conflicting demands at work must be met simultaneously (2001).

This study also found that poor management decreased job satisfaction and increased levels of stress at work. Poor management was reported by one social worker to create an "us versus them" mentality between his team and the higher administration. Communication between the opposing sides reportedly broke down and did not improve until the manager was promoted out of his position. In support of this finding, Maslach et al. (2001) reported that when workers perceive unfair treatment or biased behaviors coming from management they often begin to feel emotionally upset, exhausted, and cynical about the workplace.

Lack of co-worker support was also reported in this study as a stressor for professionals working in the social work field. When experiencing a lack of co-worker

support, social workers reported higher levels of stress and feelings of isolation. These findings validate Koeske and Koeske (1989) who reported that low levels of co-worker support were the largest contributing factor for worker stress and eventual burnout. In further support of this study's findings, Kim and Stoner (2008) and Morazes et al. (2010) reported that social workers who had decided to leave the social work field reported a lack of respect and support from co-workers as well as managers.

An emerging theme in this study that was not discussed in past literature was the stress involved in being a witness to the pain of others. Respondents reported that no matter how long a social worker has worked with clients in need, watching as another human being suffers simply does not get any easier.

Another emerging theme developed when all but one of the respondents utilized some form of the phrase "what keeps me up at night?" when questioned about the common stressors associated with a career in social work. Past research has demonstrated a multitude of stressors associated with a career in the social work field (Balloch et al. 1998; Bradley & Sutherland, 1995; Brodie, 1998; Evans et al. 2006; Kim & Stoner, 2008; Morazes, Benton, Clark, & Jacquet, 2010), but none quite conveyed the intensity of these stressors until this researcher heard respondent after respondent refer to a time of lying awake at night worrying about the challenges of the workday to come.

Protective Factors

Social workers in this study reported that good self-care helped to reduce job stress and increase overall work enjoyment. Self-care was defined as any enjoyable activity that respondents took part in that helped to alleviate stress. For example, respondents in this study reported the benefits of self-care activities such as healthy

eating, engaging in hobbies, and spending time with family and friends. Although past

research did not use the term self-care, researchers such as Collins (2008), Collins et al.

(2010), and Gibson et al. (1989) reported the stress reducing benefits of self-care like

activities such as spending time with family, friends, and even co-workers outside of

work.

       The findings of this study are in agreement with Maslach (2001) who reported

that social support was one of the primary buffers between social workers and burnout.

The particular importance of co-worker support in the workplace was emphasized by

Gibson et al. (1989), Koeske and Koeske (1989), and Um and Harrison (1998), which

was also validated by this study's findings.

       In contrast to Carver et al. (1989), who reported that co-worker support fostered

negative coping strategies such as "venting," this study's findings reported that "venting"

provided social workers with protective benefits such as obtaining co-worker assistance,

advice, and support.

       Similarities were found when discussing the importance of worker autonomy.

Social workers reported that having sufficient autonomy to prioritize tasks and make

decisions was an important quality to have as a social work professional. In support of

these findings, Elpers and Westhuis (2008) and Morazes et al. (2010) reported that

having enough worker autonomy to help clients has been associated with increases in

staff moral as well as staff longevity.

       Thematic similarities were also found in social workers' responses to working

with clients. Having the opportunity to work directly with clients was reported to

increase social workers' perceptions of job satisfaction. In agreement with these

findings, CHW, NASW (2006) reported that social workers often feel a rejuvenating sense of pride and achievement when helping clients address and find solutions to complex social issues. In further support of this study's findings, Collins et al. (2010) reported how instead of feeling anxious or drained by working directly with clients, social work students often expressed feelings of excitement and exhilaration.

Last, thematic similarities were also found in social workers' use of coping skills such as mental disengagement (Carver et al. 1989). This study's findings demonstrated social workers use of alternative employment fantasies to help reduce the anxiety brought on by their work. These findings demonstrated that when social workers felt particularly stressed by their current employment, some relied on the calming effects of fantasizing about alternative employment. In most cases, the alternative employment fantasies consisted of low stress environments that had little to nothing to do with social work. For example, working as a grocery checker, a handkerchief sales person, and a bread baker were all reported as alternative jobs that social workers thought fantasized about during extreme times of stress at work. This finding is similar to the work of Carver et al. (1989) who reported that social workers engage in a coping strategy called "mental disengagement" in order to distract their minds from stress-inducing activities. Although the findings of the current study found the use of alternative employment fantasies as helpful in reducing worker stress, Carver et al. (1989) warned that over utilizing coping strategies such as mental disengagement can cause social workers to become distracted from their work and thus result in failing to meet the needs of their clients.

One theme that emerged in this study that was not discussed in past literature was the importance of establishing good boundaries. Past research focused on social workers

developing appropriate coping strategies through staff trainings and skill building

exercises (Cohen & Cagin; Collins, 2008; Morazes et al. 2010) which were reported to

empower social workers and increase job satisfaction (Harrison, 2008), but none of these

studies focused on the need to establish boundaries to help separate respondents' work-

life and home-life. This study's findings reported two themes pertaining to "good

boundaries." The first theme emphasized the importance of separating a social worker's

work-life from a social worker's personal life. Being empathetic and working hard to

empower clients is important, but as this study emphasized, at the end of the day social

workers cannot allow their clients' problems go home with them.

The second theme emphasized the importance of physically leaving work on time.

Respondents in this study emphasized that part of being a social worker is understanding

that the work is never done. In the interest of reducing worker stress and burnout this

study's findings emphasized the need for social workers to understand and appreciate

their limits at work and know when to go home and take care of themselves. Similar to

these findings, Gillen (2008) argued that it is in the best interest of their clients for social

workers to accept the fact that they cannot always work at 100%.

Another emerging theme in this study that past research did not discuss was the

protective nature of work diversity. Social workers reported that by having multiple job

duties and roles, their work continued to be exciting and engaging. This study also found

that work diversity extended to the freedom to take on different types of careers within

the social work field. Having the option to change career paths while still remaining in

social work was found to reduce the potential for social worker burnout. It should be

noted that this study's findings also reported that although work diversity can be a

protective factor against stress and burnout, attempting to take on too many roles or challenges at one time can also cause social workers to feel overwhelmed by their work. Thus it is important for social workers to understand what their limitations are and adhere to them.

The last emerging theme regarding protective factors that was not discussed in past literature was job security. Respondents reported that a career in social work seemed to be better protected against factors such as layoffs due to age discrimination. Every respondent in this study reported that they felt secure in his/her current employment. On the other hand, the findings of this study also demonstrated that as social workers near the age of retirement, they tend to lose confidence in their ability to leave their current employment and find new work within the social work field. This demonstrates that although older social workers may be protected against being laid-off from their current employment, age discrimination may still play a part in their ability to find new employment.

The Journey to Career in Social Work

This study found that social workers often do not set out with a social work career in mind. Instead, soon-to-be social workers often try out numerous career paths before finding social work to be the best fit. This finding demonstrates why current social workers in the field today come from such rich and diverse backgrounds. Social work does not call to any one type of person in particular; instead social work seems to attract anyone and everyone who wants to make a difference in peoples' lives.

Why Social Workers Remain

This study found numerous thematic similarities with past research when exploring why social workers choose to remain in the social work field. Social workers in this study found social work to be "fun," "meaningful," and "challenging." Similar findings have been reported by Gibbs (2001) who reported that social workers who found their work to have value were likely to find satisfaction in their careers. Also in support of the current study's findings, Otkay (1992) reported that workers who felt challenged, excited, and fulfilled by their work often went on to have long and successful careers. Last, this study's findings indicated that social workers who demonstrated a natural desire to be life-long learners found social work to be especially rewarding.

Limitations

The limitations of this study were significant. Due to the respondents of this study being chosen as a sample of convenience, the findings cannot be generalized to the broader population. Sample size was another limitation. With only four respondents, this study was entirely too limited for generalizations to be applied to the wider public and hence cannot be a representation of professional social workers as a whole. Another limitation of this study was the sample ratio of two men to two women. The genders of the professionals who make up the social work field are not spilt equally, thus making this sample even less representative of the social work field. The last limitation of this study was again related to the use of a convenience sampling method for obtaining respondents. Respondents who were contacted by the researcher had already been pointed out as individuals who were inclined to agree to participate. The answers provided by these participants may only have reflected the opinions of people who were

eager to be part of a research study, thus a large pool of potential respondents was overlooked completely.

Conclusion

It would be an understatement to say that social work is a challenging field. Each day social workers choose to stand shoulder to shoulder with their clients in the face of countless uphill battles and challenges. They are asked to continuously do more for their clients even as their already limited resources continue to dwindle. No promise of fame or fortune awaits these men and women at the end of their careers and yet they persevere. The question that this study chose to explore is why do social workers choose to remain in the social work field, and the findings of this study revealed a small glimpse of the possible answer.

Social workers who have persevered over the years, although strong and compassionate on their own, have not outlasted their colleagues by sheer will alone. These amazing men and women have discovered an array of invaluable strategies that have allowed them to remain engaged and excited about their roles within the social work field. Strategies such as practicing good self-care, surrounding themselves with family and friends, advocating for work diversity and autonomy, or simply allowing their minds to drift into a soothing alternative-work fantasy for a few moments were all discovered to provide experienced social workers with the resources they needed in order to endure within such a challenging and yet rewarding field.

Implications for future research, social work curriculum and Agency Policy

This study chose to interview social workers who had had a minimum of 15 years of experience in the social work field in the hopes of uncovering protective factors that

could be passed down to the next generation of social work professionals. Although

many of the protective factors were similar in both this and past research, interesting

differences were found in the stressors associated with the social work field. For

example, this study found only one respondent who described management as a source of

stress in the workplace, while other research has reported management as a significant

source of stress (Bradley & Sutherland, 1998; Maslach et al. 2001). Three out of the four

respondents in this study were managers or supervisors themselves, which might explain

the differences between this study's findings versus past research. Future research

examining how less experienced and more experienced social workers differ in their

perception of stressors and protective factors could provide valuable insight into how or

if these factors change over the course of a social worker's career.

     Curriculum. Of all the numerous protective factors reported on in this study,

every respondent commented that self-care was an important factor that helped them to

remain in the social work field. The topic of self-care needs more emphasis within social

work curriculum and thus social work curriculum should be modified to integrate self-

care education with assignments focusing on helping students to develop their own self-

care practices. If students were taught to take self-care more seriously, they may be

better suited to take on the future stressors and challenges associated with the social work

field.

     Agency policy. Almost every respondent described the protective impact of

having diversity within their job duties. Respondents reported that having a number of

different tasks and assignments kept social workers interested in their work and engaged

with clients. Agencies should attempt to assign social workers to diverse tasks and roles

in an attempt to foster the highest levels of worker satisfaction and engagement. In

addition, agencies could also benefit by assessing social workers' likes and dislikes and

make an attempt to place workers in areas that are of personal interest to them. After

areas of interest are assessed, agencies could then divide up the less desirable

assignments and tasks equally among the social work staff, thus demonstrating an interest

improving social worker career satisfaction and potentially improve social worker

longevity.

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