

The Social Work Environment: Evidence and a Case



Overview

- The nature of social work
- Local Government Workplaces Project
- UNC-SOG initiative to provide cost-effective organizational research
- Three organizations in 2017
 - Two metropolitan area cities
 - An urban social services agency



The Nature of Social Work

- Client-based
- Complex situations
- High workloads
- Trained to depersonalized client relationships
- Some social workers take responsibility for client outcomes

Workplace Stress

- Social workers have higher stress than other occupational groups (Bennett et al. (1993; Bradley & Sutherland (1995)
- Chronic anxiety
- Depression
- Physical illness

Burnout

- A serious feature of chronic stress that can impair the human service worker's effectiveness (Collings & Murray, 1996).
 - Emotional exhaustion
 - Depersonalization
 - Reduced personal accomplishment

Sources of Social Worker Stress

- Desire to help
- Competing values
- Emotional labor
- Role conflict
- Lack of recognition
- Lack of supervisory support
- Lack of funding, personnel shortages, high worker turnover rates, bureaucratic environment
- Low-morale climates
- Role ambiguity

Local Government Workplaces Project

- Online Survey (72% responded (n=321))
- Focus Groups (5)

Focus Group Results

- Love for the job/organization
- Toxic work environment
 - Employees who speak up written up, held back
 - Social ties/gossip
 - Discourages employee voice, prevents employee growth
 - Top down
 - Hard to recover from mistakes
 - New ideas suppressed

Focus Group Results

- Disrespectful workplace behavior
 - Being called out in front of others
 - Negative talk
- Employees experience high stress

Focus Group Excerpt

- Yesterday I was walking through the parking lot with another coworker and she had this look on her face, so I just said how are you? How was your day? She said girl, this place just drains the life out of you. I mean that's saying a lot. And it's working with the families, you know that a lot of the people we serve are the underprivileged. A lot of them do have some issues, but that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about management and you, given the tools you need, given whatever it is that you need to do your job. You know, somebody who's listening to you. I'll never forget when I first started here, my units were long, two, three pages. At the time, we had 16 cases and all, again we put it in the suggestion box and the first thing we got was, those concerns don't belong in the suggestion box.

