

Social Workers' job satisfaction, private practice and professionalisation

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Evidence of low morale, poor job satisfaction and burnout, and recruitment and retention problems.

Evidence on recruitment and retention problems is numerous and readily acknowledge in the professional literature. Yet there is a lack of rigorous research about the nature of the child welfare workforce crisis and initiatives to address the issues, in particular studies focusing specifically on social workers in child care are limited.

However, past studies (from 1982 to 1991) in the international literature have shown that job dissatisfaction and burnout are the most common contributors to social workers in the field of child care leave their jobs, and that high levels of depersonalisation, role ambiguity, role conflict, stress, work overloads, lack of autonomy and influence of the funding sources, lack of support in particular co-worker's support and professional supervision, bureaucratic control and thus lack of power or control to change, and the sense of being ineffective with clients are the main reasons for burnout and turnover¹²³⁴.

More recently (2002-2004) UK evidence is showing serious recruitment and retention problems.

A study of the public service workforce conducted by the Audit Commission (2002)⁵ concluded that most were leaving the services because of "push" factors rather than "pull" factors. The study identified six main factors that contribute to the decision to leave:

1. the sense of being overwhelmed by bureaucracy, paperwork and targets;
2. insufficient resources, leading to unmanageable workloads;
3. a lack of autonomy;
4. feeling undervalued by Government, managers and the public;
5. a change agenda that feels imposed and irrelevant.

A slump in social workers' morale is worrying and there is evidence that between 1996 and 2001 there was both a sharp drop in the numbers wishing to enter the profession (applications to social work training) and acute problems in retaining experienced staff. Some London boroughs were having vacancy rates of 40%. The problem is experienced most acutely with field social workers⁶. [Also see the Workforce Study I gave you].

A profession in making: Social workers' internal conflict and dilemmas.

Munro (2004)⁷ is concerned with the impact of audit on social work practice. She concludes that social work is a profession of many problems. She points out that when it comes to monitoring practice and measure outcomes, there is a problem on the *input side*, which is that social work has only a limited, shared knowledge base to provide a rationale for determining which aspects of social work activity are significant and should be recorded. Social workers themselves have pointed out that the nature of the relationship between worker and user is the most challenging aspect of their work. As a relationship-based working, the relationship itself is the key instrument in the social work practice, and the way it is delivered is as tailored to the individual user's needs as a service can be. However, evidence indicates that social workers have been operating without clear theoretical base or shared explicit knowledge base (Munro cites Secker, 1993⁸; Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996⁹). Social workers have had problems in a) defining what their practice is about, b) pointing out what about their practices works and thus c) spreading practice of success.

From an accountant's point of view, a social work practice is a "black box". On the *output-side*, the crucial sub-division is between service outputs and user outcomes. Not only had social workers had problems with identifying measures of efficiency, i.e. service outputs, but also and despite the greater value of user outcomes there were problems with showing what counts for effectiveness (outcomes) of their work. By the time the political demands for transparency and accountability set in with intense

accountability mechanisms and auditing, social workers hadn't settled the debate among themselves whether to base their practice on a professional knowledge drawn from scientific research into their practices or on empathic and intuitive skills mainly. While still debating the issue of systematic documentation of their practices for the purpose of research and development within the profession itself, they became captured in the accountability mechanisms and an auditing regime which increased managerial control and distorted their professional development. The accountability of social workers became a rule-based managerial accountability, but not a knowledge-based professional accountability in which social workers were accountable to a professional body by delivering services based on evidence about best practice, and to service users by providing good user outcomes. With the limited knowledge base of social work and without a clear definition about what and how social workers conduct their practices, the "what counts is what works" approach to policies in their field has been difficult to apply.

Now the question is what has changed about social work? Is there a reason to believe that the time for a more independent working of social workers in which they can be personally and professionally accountable for their services has come?

Since 2001 a university degree of social work has been established and social workers have become a registered profession, committed to a professional code of conduct and with commitment to continuous improvements as part of their professional development.

What do social workers do and how do they deliver their practices? How is their service valued?

Social workers have sought to use the process of developing a relationship between the practitioner and the user of services as a means to an end in itself, and there is a renewed emphasis on relationship-based practice as a response to what is widely recognised as an increase in the levels of bureaucratisation of social work practice¹⁰.

From a review of the literature including users' views about the roles and tasks of social workers it is evident that what service users value most are social workers who are able to develop and maintain a relationship, who listen and who respect service users as individuals. The most important qualities of social workers are seen to a worker being anti-discriminatory, respecting attitudes and having very good personal communication skills¹¹. For children, qualities in social workers that enable children to discuss their feelings and take an active part in effective decision-making were:

1. reliability and keeping promises;
2. practical help;
3. ability to give support;
4. time to listen and respond;
5. seeing children's lives in the round. Social workers who talked about things that mattered to children outside the problems of their family life made children feel they were more than just cases.

Parents of children in need had very similar perspectives and included well co-ordinated interagency services and seeing the same social worker over time. Families of children with additional needs are often in contact with many different agencies and professionals, and particularly value a trusted, named person who can co-ordinate assessments, information sharing and care pathways, and help them to access the right kind of support. Preliminary results from a study of 80 care leavers aged 17 to 24 found that they valued most practical and emotional support being available in one place, having multiple needs addressed and workers who were reliable and person centred¹².

Studies have shown that social workers in child welfare services are key actors in improving recruitment and retention of foster parents¹³. Nolan Rindfleisch, emeritus faculty in social work at the Ohio State University found in his study the two out of four predictors of high satisfaction rested with the relationship between the foster parents and the social worker in the social services¹⁴.

UK studies have shown how that social work relationship can be valued¹⁵. The picture of instability which emerges in many case records is attributed in part to the lack of social work continuity, and a lack of support from young people's social workers was related to poorer placements outcomes, and that the opposite was also true: there were significantly more successful placements when social work support was good. Evidence on foster care suggests that children in foster care should do well if a) they have at least one close tie with a committed adult, b) are happy and involved at school and c) have an opportunity to break away from their background in certain respects.

What works for Social workers.

In 1998, Dickinson and Perry highlighted eight practices and work environment conditions that enhance feelings of job satisfaction: (1) personal growth and development opportunities; (2) co-worker support and recognition; (3) opportunities for enhancing knowledge and skills; (4) a personal sense of accomplishment; (5) the authority to make professional decisions; (6) ways to make a difference in client lives; (7) extent of global satisfaction with job; and (8) level of personal influence to positively affect clients¹⁶.

More recent studies are indicating that positive work environments in child welfare systems are associated with lower staff turnover, greater job satisfaction, higher service quality, and better service outcomes. These studies are suggesting work-site interventions to reduce burnout and increase job satisfaction and thus improve recruitment and retention of social workers and staff in child welfare. These interventions include various measures taken to influence workers' satisfaction by implementing a suitable incentive structure that matches workers' motivations and organisational objectives such as greater job and decision-making autonomy, reducing caseload, increasing workforce size, providing peer support groups, supervision and professional development opportunities^{17 18 19 20}. Moreover, as Dickinson and Perry showed in 1998, relevant education seems to be a predictive factor. Among all social workers in a national study of child and adolescent well-being, those with a BSW were significantly more satisfied than workers with non-social work bachelor's degree²¹.

The Audit Commission's analysis (2002)²² brought out four critical success factors:

1. the experience of work must match people expectations;
2. the working environment must engage, enable and support the staff;
3. those delivering public services must feel that they are valued, respected and fairly rewarded; and
4. the shift from a public sector to a public services workforce must be actively managed to create a synergy, rather than a clash of values.

There is growing evidence that social workers in the UK have opted out of the public sector to practice their social work independent of Local Authority's Social services departments²³. Most of the IFP managers were qualified social workers with a background in LA child and family services. Some of them and the LA managers had once been colleagues in the same social services departments. A crucial element in the building-up of the working relationship was seen to be this common background and the same mind-set, "both of us have a sound, solid child care background and we share views about the process around child care planning"²⁴.

According to the references above, the idea behind Social Care Practices is supported in studies on various work-site interventions such as greater job and decision-making autonomy, a level of personal influence to positively affect clients and eventually reduced case load. However, the evidence suggests that these particular work-site interventions alone are not enough. Strategies aiming at increasing professional qualifications of social workers, for instance, a BSc degree in social work as a basic and further MSc degree especially focused on child welfare services.

In Sweden there has been a process of change which has been gradual and a part of a process of spontaneous privatisation where professionals have gone private and provide various types of services to local authorities, i.e. a profession-driven privatisation as a strategy for professionalisation²⁵. Surveys of 1000 Swedish social workers and 801 social work students showed that more than one third of Swedish social workers expect to be working in private practice within 10 years. On the general issue of privatisation, most social workers are negative. However, a more positive group, which often cited ideological reasons, is a frequent exception to the sceptical majority. More importantly, when the focus is shifted from welfare state activities in general to specific social work services, the impact of ideology seems to diminish and social workers are increasingly ambivalent. When taking into account professional considerations, the actual interest in self-employment among social workers in Sweden is greater than expected.

The study revealed links between privatisation and professionalisation with regard to both the reasons for, and actual trajectories behind self-employment. Moreover, the self-employed rated higher on almost every professionalisation indicator, leading to the conclusion that there is most definitely a profession-driven privatisation. The study found support for the hypothesis that privatisation was a professional strategy for status, legitimacy, autonomy and control (“pull factors”), and also for a second hypothesis about discontent (“push factors”), although support is not as strong among workers already self-employed compared to those who want to be self-employed.

In the field of foster care and services for looked after children a number of independent organisations work in partnership with local authorities all over Sweden offering local authorities information, professional as well as practical advice and a range of services for foster carers.

Improved professional qualification of social workers would provide the base for a) social workers’ professional autonomy in the provision of services for children in care, b) a creation of centres of excellence in services for children in care, c) a robust system of high-quality professional supervision, and d) developing a critical mass of professional/clinical expertise and skills in the field of social welfare services for children and thus provide the conditions for an evidence based practice model in child care services. By then a comparison between GP practices and Social care practices is more realistic because ensuring public protection would be based on professional accountability in both practices. The Government’s just published review *Options for Excellence: Building the Social Care Workforce of the Future* is set out to improve professional standards and accountability in the social care workforce in general and for social workers in particular.

A theoretical framing of the issue of Social Worker’s opting out of LAs.

The increased number of social workers going private can be understood in terms of the Hirschman analysis as I applied it in my analysis of the process of hospital mergers in Reykjavik. Nurses, who had nowhere else to go, fought their battle by exercising *voice* in the management hierarchy, and the medical doctors who found an *exit* option and were opting out of the hospitals at an unprecedented scale rapidly increasing their activities (publicly funded on fee-for-service basis) in their private clinics outside the hospitals. After the merger which left Reykjavik with only one big hospital the nurses profession has been suffering from low morale and burnouts. High vacancy rate at the hospital has increased use of agency staff, a brand new development in Iceland and hospital has also been recruiting nurses from other Nordic countries. Still, Iceland has among the highest ratio of nurses staff per 100 000 population in the OECD countries.

This is the summary based on Hirschman’s own text. It is useful to read it with social workers in mind and their loyalty to or their exercise of voice within or their exit from the LA’s Social services departments. Social workers are known for a high degree of loyalty to public services and their clients.

It explores the relationship between policy-makers, implementers and those on the receiving end. Hirschman brings together concepts from economics (exit) and political science (voice) which are

indeed very strong forces. As to provide a more solid understanding of conditions that favour coexistence of exit and voice, Hirschman introduces the concept of loyalty, which he argues, as a rule, holds exit at bay and activates voice. As such loyalty to an organisation, firm or a political party can function as a barrier to exit which again can serve to stimulate voice as a recuperation mechanism in the organisation which may deteriorate even further through free exit. Loyalty is thus a key concept in the battle between exit and voice because as a result of it, members may be locked into their organisation a little longer and thus use the voice option with greater determination and resourcefulness, than would otherwise be the case, and this to the benefit of the organisation. Hirschman argues that this is helpful because it implies the possibility of disloyalty, that is exit. Loyalty makes no sense in an organisation with an unbreakable monopoly. To directly quote Hirschman “while loyalty postpones exit its very existence is predicated on the possibility to exit. That if even the most loyal member can exit is often an important part of his bargaining power vis-a-vis the organisation. The chances for voice to function effectively as a recuperation mechanism are appreciably strengthened if voice is backed up by the threat of exit, whether it is made openly or whether the possibility of exit is merely well understood to be an element in the situation by all concerned.”(Hirschman 1969 :82)²⁶.

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