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Social Workers' Experiences Using Self-Advocacy on the Job

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ABSTRACT

While many social workers spend the bulk of their days helping their clients learn how to advocate, research shows that social workers often do not advocate for their own rights and well-being at work. The qualitative research that exists focuses primarily on social workers in urban areas who work in child protective services and residential treatment centers. In this study, licensed Master's-level social workers (either LMSW-CCs or LCSWs) in Maine were asked about their experiences of using self-advocacy on the job.

INTRODUCTION

Advocacy, defined as "an action on behalf of...people subject to...injustice" is a key focus of the social work profession (as cited in Brown and Livermore, 2015, p. 50; McLaughlin, 2009). Self-advocacy is a concept that comes from the disability field, and focuses on people building competencies so that they can defend their rights (McLaughlin, 2009). Though multiple studies are available concerning how social workers have advocated with and for their clients over time, there is a lack of literature on how social workers advocate for themselves as individual employees. Indeed, social workers are faced with a quandary about how and when to advocate for their needs, as the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics states that social workers are to "elevate service to others above self-interest" (Code of Ethics, 2008). However, in a field where burnout and secondary trauma occur in significant parts of the population and wages remain low, it is essential to figure out where self-advocacy fits in relation to job satisfaction.

OBJECTIVES

- Share social workers' experiences using self-advocacy at work.
- Identify what contributes (both positively and negatively) to social workers' job satisfaction.
- Explore what social workers find essential for new social workers to thrive within the field.

METHODS AND FRAMEWORKS

Phenomenology:

- Phenomenology is a method of deriving meaning from people's lived experiences of certain situations (Vickers & Offredy, n.d.).

Marxist Framework:

- Since this study revolves around how social workers use self-advocacy in the workforce, Marxism is key. Here, a Marxist framework was used because social work is a field that is often fiscally undervalued while demanding high levels of emotional labor from its workers.

Social Constructivist Framework:

- Social work is a diverse field, so I was interested in exploring which social workers would answer my inquiry about self-advocacy, and why they chose to disclose sometimes-volatile, often personal information to me about their careers.

PARTICIPANTS

- 49 participants were contacted by email, inviting them to participate.
- Criteria for inclusion: Participants had to be licensed Master's-level social workers in the state of Maine (LMSWs, LMSW-CCs, or LCSWs), and also had to self-report if they had used self-advocacy in past or present social work employment.
- Eight people responded to the interview request. Of those eight, one participant's interview could not be used due to recording malfunctions.
- Participants ranged in age from their late twenties to their mid-sixties. Most participants were between the ages of forty and sixty.
- Participants primarily worked in hospice or private practice settings.
- Five participants identified as women, and two participants identified as men.

THEMES AND ESSENCES

Theme One: My Work has Meaning

Essence: "I wanted to do hospice social work because my family had had good experiences with hospice. I like the hospice philosophy, which is neither prolong life nor hasten death. It's all about giving people choices; putting the patient in charge. I think it's one of the few pieces of the healthcare world that works the way it's supposed to...I think the model is patient-focused and patient-driven. As a professional, I find it rewarding to, you know, walk with families on that part of their journey" (Therapist Four).

Theme Two: Challenges

Essence: "Social workers allowed themselves to be diminished. They bought in. they felt they wouldn't be able to get the money unless they started diagnosing. People's focus – and so they joined the fields, rather than holding their ground about community development, community advocacy, examining the interfaces between the environment and the individual, looking at social capital rather than the pathology. It's done its own injustice to itself" (Therapist Two).

Theme Three: Making it Work for Me

Essence: "I think that self-advocacy is important no matter what, but I think you'll do better and be more respected if you advocate for yourself. I saw a lot of people working through terrible health conditions just so they could have the insurance. It's not good. That's a problem with most employers these days – not unique to social work, but it's just the way it is" (Therapist One).

References

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RESULTS

This study explored how Master's level social workers in Maine had used self-advocacy in current or previous employment. Social workers were asked to self-identify whether or not they felt they had advocated for themselves – there was no set answer predetermined for them. Their interviews, though not generalizable to all social workers, helped to create themes of what practicing social work in Maine looks like to some practitioners.

Three main themes emerged from the data. These are social workers finding meaning in their own work, challenges social workers face on the job, and social workers making their jobs work for them.

DISCUSSION

Though the literature often states that social workers are unhappy with the wages they receive for the work they do, most of the seven social workers interviewed stated that they believed they were paid well for the services they provide. One reason for this may be because the social workers interviewed worked primarily in hospice and in private practice – areas where wages are typically higher. Another reason might be because many of these social workers have been in practice for five or more years. Satisfaction with wages was not why people stayed in social work – instead, many participants noted the importance of helping their clients within the methods of social work they had chosen to apply.

Consistent with the literature, this study found that the seven social workers interviewed faced challenges such as burnout and vicarious trauma at work. Several of the social workers interviewed mentioned that they had considered leaving the field of social work, and one mentioned that he had never considered himself in the field to begin with.

To counter these difficulties, social workers interviewed often adapted their work to fit their lives, whether it was to work part-time because of an illness, to work a variety of jobs, or to take ample time for self-care. These all helped social workers stay within the field.

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