



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 15
Issue 3 *September*

Article 8

September 1988

Recisions, Organizational Conditions and Job Satisfaction Among Black and White Human Service Workers: A Research Note

R. L. McNeely
University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Race and Ethnicity Commons, Social Work Commons, and the Work, Economy and Organizations Commons

Recommended Citation

McNeely, R. L. (1988) "Recisions, Organizational Conditions and Job Satisfaction Among Black and White Human Service Workers: A Research Note," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 15: Iss. 3, Article 8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.1864>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol15/iss3/8>

This Research Note is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

Recisions, Organizational Conditions and Job Satisfaction Among Black and White Human Service Workers: A Research Note*

R. L. McNEELY

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
School of Social Welfare

Despite the growing attention evident in the human services literature on the related topics of job satisfaction and burnout, virtually none of the empirical studies published to date have examined the possible influences of recent federal and state cutbacks in human service funding levels on the job satisfaction of human service workers. One outcome of these cutbacks has been the curtailment of services offered by county welfare departments, often achieved by reducing the number of public welfare workers through hiring freezes, attrition, layoffs, etc. The remaining public welfare workers often have then been placed in the unenviable position of trying to maintain, as best they can, previous levels of service with fewer staff and smaller budgets.

McNeely and Schultz (1986) have suggested recently that these conditions adversely impact the satisfactions received from county welfare work. However, their contentions were based largely upon a content analysis of extemporaneous remarks made by 481 subjects participating in a national survey (N = 1500) that was designed to identify predictors of job satisfaction among public welfare workers. Data presented in this report were obtained from the national survey: They offer a basis for assessing the degree to which empirical support is provided for McNeely and Schultz's hypothesis. The data have been collected over a period of several years from 1,500 county welfare workers located in geographically disparate areas of the nation. Data ob-

*The research reported in this article was funded by the School of Social Welfare, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The author wishes to acknowledge David Austin for his comments on material reported in this article.

tained for the study, fortunately, include information on the racial status of respondents. The inclusion of race is important because, due to having less seniority, Blacks and Hispanics often have been more vulnerable than Caucasians to cutback-inspired threats of layoffs or terminations. Published reports of previous findings generated by the broader study may be found elsewhere (McNeely, 1983; 1984; 1985; 1987; McNeely, et al., 1986).

Data were collected in Wisconsin from the Racine Comprehensive Human Service Department (RHSD) in 1981. Data were obtained in 1983 from the Dade County (Fla.) Department of Human Resources (DDHR). Employees of the Genesee County (Mich.) Department of Social Services (GDSS) and the County of Sacramento (Calif.) Department of Social Welfare (SDSW) were surveyed in 1984. The variety of conditions present in the four county departments offered an opportunity to examine whether or not job satisfaction levels varied in accord with the severity of retrenchments experienced during the periods surveys were conducted.

In brief, the onset of recisions began in 1981 following the Reagan administration's efforts to curtail spending for social service programs. Since then, reductions in federal funding for human service programs have become increasingly pronounced.

Anticipation of the initial wave of federal budget recisions resulted in a 5% reduction in RHSD staff during 1981 (McNeely, 1985). Consequently RHSD staff were forced to accept increased workloads and diminished job security. By 1983, when DDHR was surveyed, the cycle of erosion in federal spending had worsened, forcing progressively sterner conditions in county welfare work. However, DDHR was less impacted by these conditions than many other county departments due to its location in a state with a comparatively thriving economy. Although some retrenchment had occurred, new programs were being implemented, new staff were being hired, new support equipment was being purchased, and funds were available for miscellaneous projects. In contrast, SDSW not only had felt the brunt of many recisions by 1984, it had been victimized previously by the passage in 1978 of Proposition 13. Social services staff were reduced by 12% during 1981. Although passed in 1978, the effects of Proposition 13 were not felt by the Department until

1982 following the failure in court of a suit challenging the legality of Proposition 13. Beginning in 1983, 34 additional employees, primarily those in managerial positions, were demoted as yet another response to trimmed budgets.

The conditions under which SDSW operated in 1984, unquestionably, were more stressful than those experienced by RHSD in 1981, or those experienced by DDHR in 1983. RHSD had not suffered a twin onslaught in 1981. Nor had RHSD staff witnessed the continuation of federal retrenchments that was to follow soon. As indicated previously, DDHR was comparatively unaffected.

GDSS, perhaps, operated under the most stressful conditions of all. Due to the sudden menacing decline of Michigan's automobile industry and the corresponding shortfalls in state tax revenues, in 1980 Governor William Milliken declared that state employment rolls would have to be cut. The situation was exacerbated in the human services sector with federal recisions, resulting in the elimination of some programs and the merger of others. Mr. Charles Williams, GDSS executive director, estimates that between 15 and 20% of GDSS staff were lost. To make matters worse, thousands of employees were being laid off by the many automotive plants located in Genesee County. Thus, the number of needy individuals clamoring for social services was increasing markedly at the same time the number of staff providing services was decreasing.

Unfortunately, a precise measurement of the impact of recisions on the four departments cannot be provided. For example, assessing the impact of demotions versus the threat or reality of layoffs was beyond the scope of data collected for the survey. Additionally, had the study been a laboratory experiment, the effects of exacerbating factors, such as those resulting from the enactment of Proposition 13 recisions in Sacramento County and recisions resulting from the dramatic downturn in Michigan's economy, could have been controlled. Thus, an exclusive examination of the "pure" effects of federal recisions could have been undertaken. Too, as the questions examined in this article were not among the primary research objectives of the parent study no method other than a ranking, based on the research team's judgment, of the severity of conditions experienced by

the departments could be achieved. On this point the ranking presented in this article was subjected to review by executive administrative staff in the county departments surveyed, with all of them concurring that the ranking of conditions experienced in the four departments was accurate. In fact, there was no disagreement whatsoever that the conditions experienced by GDSS and SDSW were more stressful than those experienced by RHSD and DDHR.

One hundred and five subjects from RHSD participated in the survey in 1981. In 1983, 337 respondents from DDHR returned questionnaires. In 1984, 303 questionnaires were returned from GDSS and 755 questionnaires were returned from SDSW. Altogether, 3,027 questionnaires had been sent out to valid home addresses of respondents. The survey yielded a total of 1500 replies, amounting to a response rate of 49.6%.

Data were collected via a structured mail questionnaire consisting of 115 items. Two job satisfaction indices were imbedded into the questionnaire. These were the Index of Job Satisfaction (Brayfield and Rothe, 1951) hereafter referred to as the IJS, and the Morse Index of Intrinsic Job Satisfaction (Morse, 1953), hereafter referred to as the MI (only the four MI items relating to intrinsic satisfaction were employed in this study). The IJS focuses upon employees' subjective assessments regarding whether or not a job is unpleasant, boring, like a hobby, more enjoyable than one's leisure time, etc. It consists of 18 items. IJS scores were used to determine overall work satisfaction levels. The MI allowed an assessment of what Herzberg (1959) referred to as intrinsic job satisfaction. Intrinsic factors refer to those aspects of the job that satisfy what has been described as the fundamental need of workers for creative and challenging work (O'Toole, et al., 1973).

The corrected odd-even product-moment reliability coefficient for the IJS is $r = .87$ (Miller, 1977). No test-retest or split-half reliability coefficients have been reported for the MI, but the scale has been found to be highly related to scales measuring other aspects (such as pride in group performance) of one's overall job satisfaction (Miller, 1977). F-tests were used to analyze the data.

Presuming a relationship exists between budgetary conditions and the job satisfaction of welfare workers, one would

Table 1

Overall (IJS) and Intrinsic (MI) Job Satisfaction by Departmental and Population Groups

Departmental and Population Groups	N	\bar{X}	Sd	F-Value	Significance
<i>Index of Job Satisfaction</i> 1453*					
RHSD	104	66.8	8.4	28.8	.000
DDHR	331	66.0	10.1		
SDSW	747	60.3	11.6		
GDSS	271	56.6	12.6		
<i>Morse Index</i> 1459*					
RHSD	105	16.0	3.1	24.5	.000
DDHR	335	16.1	2.9		
SDSW	747	14.5	3.2		
GDSS	272	13.7	3.7		
<i>Index of Job Satisfaction</i> 1247**					
Blacks	260	63.4	10.8	9.6	.000
Hispanics	111	63.5	10.9		
Caucasians	876	60.2	12.2		
<i>Morse Index</i> 1251**					
Blacks	262	15.5	3.1	11.4	.000
Hispanics	112	15.4	3.0		
Caucasians	877	14.5	3.4		

*Subject totals do not equal totals reported for response rate due to missing questionnaire data.

**RHSD respondents are excluded because data on racial status were not collected for subjects employed at RHSD. Individuals reporting their racial status as "Other" are excluded.

expect RHSD and DDHR staff to report higher satisfaction levels than those reported for SDSW and GDSS.

Table 1 indicates that job satisfaction levels on both overall and intrinsic satisfaction conform to the predicted pattern. RHSD and DDHR employees report significantly higher satisfaction on both indices than SDSW and GDSS employees. However, a further examination of the data, as may be evidenced in Table 2,

Table 2

Overall (IJS) and Intrinsic (MI) Job Satisfaction by Departmental Population Groups

Groups	N*	\bar{X}	Sd	N*	\bar{X}	Sd
	<i>Index of Job Satisfaction</i>			<i>Morse Index</i>		
DDHR	259			262		
Blacks	167	65.0	10.4	170	15.8	3.1
Caucasians	92	67.3	9.8	92	16.5	2.9
SDSW	619			618		
Blacks	63	59.8	11.1	62	14.6	3.1
Caucasians	556	60.5	11.8	556	14.5	3.3
GDSS	258			259		
Blacks	30	62.2	11.1	30	15.2	3.2
Caucasians	228	56.8	12.7	229	13.5	3.7

*RHSD respondents, Hispanics and "Others" are excluded.

yielded a serendipitous finding. (Data on racial status were not collected for subjects employed at RHSD; thus RHSD was not included in this portion of the analysis. Similarly, there were too few Hispanics employed in GDSS to permit the inclusion of GDSS Hispanics; therefore all Hispanics were removed.) While the job satisfaction scores of Caucasian employees fit the pattern of recisions, with DDHR and SDSW Caucasians being the most satisfied and GDSS Caucasians being significantly less satisfied, the pattern of satisfaction recorded for Black employees was unrelated to the severity of cutbacks.

Instead, the satisfaction of Blacks fit a different pattern. The most satisfied Blacks were in GDSS and DDHR. The least satisfied Blacks were in SDSW. At the time of the surveys, the executive directors of GDSS and DDHR were Black; the SDSW director was Caucasian. These observations tended to suggest that the racial status of an executive director may have a substantive effect (cf. Fox and Lefkowitz) on the satisfaction of Black employees, but is virtually unrelated to the satisfaction of Caucasian employees.

A two-way analysis of variance was performed to examine the hypothesis. As indicated in Table 3, once the effects of county location are removed, there is no overall difference between the

Table 3

Two-Way Analysis of Variance of Job Satisfaction Indices by County and Race

Effect	F-value	d.f.	Significance
<i>Index of Job Satisfaction</i>			
<i>Main Effect</i>			
County	35.74	2	.000
Race	.01	1	.919
Interaction (County x Race)	4.16	2	.016
<i>Morse Index</i>			
<i>Main Effect</i>			
County	35.21	2	.000
Race	.04	1	.847
Interaction (County x Race)	4.54	2	.011

racial groups on either job satisfaction measure. However, there are interaction effects wherein satisfaction between the races within the counties is patterned very differently. Thus, race differences observed in Table 1 are attributable to differences in the counties (e.g., Blacks are less satisfied in two of three counties on overall satisfaction despite registering higher aggregate satisfaction), with the satisfaction of Blacks and Caucasians within these counties adhering to significantly different patterns, as evidenced by the test of interaction effects. In the case of Caucasians, the pattern of satisfaction conforms to recision patterns, with those in the most severely affected programs being least satisfied. Black satisfaction conforms to the expected pattern with Blacks in departments managed by Black executive directors being significantly more satisfied than other Blacks. Nevertheless, the overall effect of race is insignificant.

The statistical insignificance of race was puzzling, and warranted further examination in an effort to account for the finding. Several explanations were explored; the best of these was rooted in situational organizational conditions peculiar to SDSW.

The twin onslaught imposed on SDSW by Proposition 13 and the effects of continued federal recisions served to inspire increased union activity seeking to protect workers' jobs. Thus, the United Public Assistance Workers (UPAW), the independent

union representing SDSW staff, began a highly visible campaign in 1981 to force the county board to grant protections ensuring immunity from layoffs. The high visibility of union activity seeking job protections, which the county was unable to grant, served to exacerbate job insecurity fears among SDSW staff. Under these conditions some employees began to debate who among them should be laid off first. Some believed that a relatively new group of employees, known as "special skills" workers, should be among the first to go if extensive layoffs occurred. Special skills employees were those hired to work with Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans and Asians (primarily Laotian, Vietnamese and Chinese). As a group, they had less seniority than many other employees. Ultimately, a suit was filed to settle the question.

Special skills employees are required to be members of the client populations they serve. Consequently, the identification of special skills employees as those that should be laid off first targeted many of SDSW's minority employees for employment jeopardy. The earmarking of minority employees for layoffs fostered negative conditions within the organization, resulting in widespread claims of racism, and reverse racism. Given this climate, it is understandable how Blacks employed at SDSW were less satisfied than Blacks employed elsewhere. Nonetheless, they were more satisfied than GDSS's Caucasian employees, and nearly as satisfied as SDSW's Caucasian workers, both of whom appeared to be reacting to the effects of budgetary retrenchments.

Data presented in this report are suggestive of the need to take into account the possible influence of funding retrenchments in future job satisfaction studies involving human service workers (cf. McNeely and Schultz, 1986). The satisfaction levels of these workers may be as reflective of the presence or absence of adequate funding as it is of more static, situationally less sensitive factors such as job challenge, autonomy, facilitative leadership, job rewards, etc. The latter factors are among those often identified in the human services literature as predictive of job satisfaction, but virtually none of these studies have examined budgetary conditions. One recent exception has shown that predictors of satisfaction are modified during periods of funding retrenchment (McNeely, 1985).

Too, the racial status of respondents warrants examination. Again, virtually none of the human service job satisfaction studies have taken race into account as a possible explanation of, or influence on satisfaction. One exception is the work of Wright, Wesley-King and Berg (1985) who concluded that Blacks represent a distinct subpopulation of the larger human services population. Some race-focused studies involving other types of workers have found substantive differences between Blacks and Caucasians (cf. Forgionne and Peeters, 1983; Gold, Webb and Smith, 1982; Bartell, 1981).

In summary, data presented herein are suggestive of possible methodological limitations in the bulk of the human services job satisfaction literature. Due to the small N (only four county departments), the findings of this study must be viewed as both tentative and speculative. In addition, there may be other influences explaining the differences observed between the races that were not taken into account in this study. Thus, the findings have been presented for heuristic purposes in an effort to encourage future examinations that consider the possible influence(s) of fiscal conditions, and the possible mediating or confounding effects of race, or race-related conditions existing within the organizations being investigated.

References

- Bartell, A. P. (1981). Race differences in job satisfaction: A reappraisal. *The Journal of Human Resources*, 16(2), 294-303.
- Brayfield, A. H. and Rothe, H. F. (1951). An index of job satisfaction. *Journal of Applied Sociology*, 35(5), 307-311.
- Forgionne, G. A. and Peeters, V. E. (1983). Race and sex-related differences in job satisfaction and motivation among managers. *Personnel Administrator*, 29(February), 66-72.
- Fox, H. and Lefkowitz, J. (1974). Differential validity: Ethnic groups as a moderator in predicting job performance. *Personnel Psychology*, 27(2), 209-223.
- Gold, R. S., Webb, L. J. and Smith, J. K. (1982). Racial differences in job satisfaction among white and Black mental health employees. *The Journal of Psychology*, 111(2), 255-261.
- Herzberg, F. (1959). *The Motivation to Work*. New York, N.Y.: John Wiley and Sons.
- McNeely, R. L. (1987). Job satisfaction and other characteristics of Asian-American human service workers. *Social Work Research and Abstracts*, 23(4), 7-9.

- McNeely, R. L. and Schultz, B. (1986). *Federal recisions and job satisfaction in the human services: What do the workers say?* Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Center for Advanced Studies in Social Welfare (monograph), 28 pp.
- McNeely, R. L., Feyerherm, W. and Johnson, R. E. (1986). Services integration and job satisfaction reactions in a comprehensive human resource agency. *Administration in Social Work*, 10(1), 39–53.
- McNeely, R. L. (1985). Gender and job satisfaction during budgetary retrenchment. *Administration in Mental Health*, 12(4), 233–245.
- McNeely, R. L. (1984). Occupation, gender and work satisfaction in a comprehensive human services department. *Administration in Social Work*, 8(2), 35–47.
- McNeely, R. L. (1983). Organizational patterns and work satisfaction in a comprehensive human services agency: An empirical test. *Human Relations*, 36(10), 957–972.
- Miller, D. C. (1977). *Handbook of Research Design and Social Measurement*. New York, N.Y.: David McKay, Inc.
- Morse, N. C. (1953). *Satisfaction in the White-Collar Job*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research.
- O'Toole, J., et al. (1973). *Work in America: Report of a Special Task Force to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare*. Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press.
- Wright, R., Wesley-King, S. and Berg, W. E. (1985). Job satisfaction in the workplace: A study of Black females in management positions. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 8(3), 65–79.