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Burnout and Job Satisfaction:
Their Relationship to
Perceived Competence and
Work Stress Among Undergraduate
and Graduate Social Workers

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This study investigated the effects of two types of social work competency on job satisfaction and burnout among undergraduate and graduate social workers. While previous research has suggested that perceived practice competence may increase job satisfaction and reduce burnout, the findings of this study suggest that there is a differential effect between various types of competence on these factors, especially among undergraduate workers. The findings did not support the contention that perceived practice competence was a primary cause of burnout reduction among graduate workers or undergraduate workers, when compared to other occupational stressors.

The profession of social worker has been shown to be especially vulnerable to work stress and resulting burnout in a number of significant studies (Freudenberger, 1977; Harrison, 1983; Daley, 1979; Pines & Kafry, 1978; Jayaratne & Chess, 1983). As a remedy to these problems, a number of studies have suggested that the key to burnout prevention and remediation is the development of increased practice competency among social workers, and have observed that this has been a neglected area of study (Streepy, 1981; Harrison, 1983; Heller, Price, & Sher, 1983). In response to this concern, Corcoran and Bryce (1983) reported that competency training workshops for social service workers in interpersonal skills were associated with less reported burnout, as measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory. In addition, Farber and Heifetz (1982) reported that a perceived

lack of therapeutic success with clients was a primary factor in burnout among a sample of psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers. According to Jayaratne and Chess (1986), perceptions of competence by social workers did buffer (moderate) levels of burnout, as measured by a modified version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory among a sample of child welfare workers. All of these studies supported the contention stated by Harrison (1983) that burnout may be a function of perceived competence among various mental health occupations, and that the extent to which a worker perceives that he or she is having an effect on client problems, may moderate levels of experienced burnout.

However, we are not aware of any studies which have examined the relationship between various types of competency and burnout among both undergraduate and graduate degree social workers, measured separately, although both groups have been present in a number of research studies previously cited (Harrison, 1980; Streepy, 1981; Jayaratne & Chess, 1986).

Therefore, the present study is an examination of the relationship between two types of perceived competency (knowledge of subject matter and mastery of practice methods), and job satisfaction and burnout among these two different groups of social workers, as well as the relationship between competency and a variety of work stressors.

It is not our intent in this report to examine differences in the objective knowledge and skill competence between and among undergraduate and graduate workers, however measured, but rather to examine each group of workers' personal perceptions of their practice knowledge and skills. This research approach is what Kurt Lewin (1951) called the examination of the "psychological environment" in which a worker functions.

Method

Study Samples

Two separate samples of social workers have been used in this study. Both samples were surveyed at the same time and received the same ten page questionnaire. The first sample consisted of 1,173 master's degree (MSW) social workers randomly

drawn from the membership of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). The response rate from this sample was 72.7% (N=852). A separate sample of 192 individuals listed in the NASW directory as baccalaureate degree (BA/BS/BSW) workers were also randomly selected. The response rate from this latter sample was 63.5% (N=122). It is important to note that the small size of the baccalaureate degree sample is a function of their lower membership level in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW Data Bank, 1985). However, the findings presented in this report are representative of those workers, both undergraduate and graduate, who do belong to NASW.

From these two groups of respondents, only the responses of those social workers who were engaged in direct practice with clients, were selected. This criterion resulted in a sample size of 108 baccalaureate degree (BA, BS, or BSW) workers and 639 master's degree (MSW) workers. The mean age of undergraduate workers was 29.3 years, while the mean age of the graduate workers was 41.3 years. There were fewer males (15.0%) in the undergraduate group than in the graduate group (30.1%). The average time in current position for undergraduate workers was 1.7 years, for graduate workers 2.8 years. These social workers were employed in a number of settings: mental health agencies (undergrad. 26.4%; grad. 41.3%), health agencies (undergrad. 26.4%; grad. 17.7%), child welfare agencies (undergrad. 20.8%; grad. 19.1%), and a variety of other settings (undergrad. 26.4%; grad. 21.9%).

Study Variables

Most of the variables examined, and the questionnaires used in this report have been used widely in the study of burnout and job satisfaction, and are described below. The reliability estimates of these questionnaires and measures have been reported previously (Jayaratne & Chess, 1986).

Measures of Burnout, and Job Satisfaction

The dependent variables used in this study were items and indices measuring job satisfaction, and measures of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, personal accomplishment, which

together constitute the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Job satisfaction was measured by the single item: "All in all, how satisfied would you say you are with your job?" This item has been widely used in national surveys of job satisfaction, and has a score range from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 4 (very satisfied) (Quinn & Shepard, 1974; Quinn & Staines, 1978).

The indices which measured burnout were based on a modified version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984). This Inventory has three subscales, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion was measured by a single item, "Are you burned out?", with a score range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The depersonalization scale is a five item scale with a score range from 5 (strongly disagree) to 35 (strongly agree). A sample item is, "I treat some clients as impersonal objects." The personal accomplishment scale is an eight item scale with a score range from 8 (strongly disagree) to 56 (strongly agree). A sample item is, "I can deal effectively with the problems of my clients." The content of these three subscales correspond to the generally accepted definitions of burnout (Perlman & Hartman, 1982).

Work Stress Measures

The measures of work stress used in this study (role ambiguity, workload, and role conflict) have been widely used in studies of job satisfaction and burnout (Quinn & Shepard, 1974; Quinn & Staines, 1978; Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, & Pinneau, 1975).

Additional measures of work related stress (job challenge, financial rewards, and fairness in promotional opportunities) were also used in this study, and have been used in studies of job satisfaction (Jayaratne & Chess, 1982-1983; Quinn & Shepard, 1974).

Practice Competency Measures

The level of perceived competence was measured by two questions about social work knowledge and mastery of prac-

tice skills: "In thinking about your work last year, how would you rate (a) your knowledge of subject matter in your area of practice, and (b) your mastery of practice methods on the job?" The score range of each of these questions was from 1 (low) to 5 (high). These two items have been used in a previous study of the buffering effects of competence on burnout among social workers (Jayaratne & Chess, 1986).

Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the comparison of the mean scores for the study variables between the two groups of workers.

Table 1

Mean Scores Between Groups of Social Workers on Study Variables

Factors	Undergraduate Workers	Graduate Workers	T-Score
Job Satisfaction			
M	3.07	3.15	-.98
SD	.78	.74	
Emotional Exhaustion			
M	3.40	3.19	1.06
SD	1.89	1.92	
Depersonalization			
M	12.58	11.05	2.85**
SD	5.43	5.09	
Personal Accomplishment			
M	37.43	39.42	-3.43**
SD	5.65	5.50	
Role Ambiguity			
M	7.85	7.64	.66
SD	3.22	2.84	
Workload			
M	15.88	15.87	.02
SD	3.28	3.19	
Challenge			
M	17.16	17.80	-1.89
SD	3.10	3.18	

Financial Rewards			
M	8.40	8.64	-1.04
SD	2.12	2.21	
Promotion			
M	7.03	6.32	2.71**
SD	2.32	2.36	
Role Conflict			
M	10.63	10.71	-.26
SD	2.95	3.98	
Knowledge Mastery			
M	3.86	4.32	-5.70**
SD	.89	.72	
Practice Mastery			
M	3.83	4.23	-4.97**
SD	.80	.74	

1. On each scale, higher scores indicate a higher value on that particular attribute.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

The results show that there are statistically significant mean score differences between undergraduate workers and graduate workers on two of the burnout subscales. Undergraduate workers reported higher levels of depersonalization and less personal accomplishment in dealing with clients, than graduate workers. It is of interest that Maslach (1982) reported that depersonalization has been found to be inversely related to the level of educational attainment among a variety of research studies.

Graduate workers reported significantly higher mean scores related to knowledge and practice mastery than undergraduate workers. Among undergraduate workers 22.9% perceived themselves to be highly competent in mastery of content, and 20.0% perceived themselves to be highly competent in mastery of practice methods, whereas 45.4% of graduate workers perceived themselves to be highly competent in mastery of content, and 38.6% highly competent in mastery of practice methods.

Both of these findings may be reflective differences in the amount and type of educational training received by each group. However, there is considerable controversy in the literature over the nature of the actual differences between

undergraduate and graduate social work training. For example, Dinerman (1982) stated in a study of curriculum content of BSW and MSW programs, that it was evident that some programs at the BSW level offered more preparation for social work practice than did some MSW programs, and that some nongraduate degree entry level workers may be more proficient in some content areas than advanced degree workers. She also stated that degree level was no predictor of the exposure to any social work educational content, nor did she find persuasive evidence of a continuum of training in social work knowledge for students moving from a BSW to a MSW program. These findings make it very difficult to relate the differences in knowledge mastery or practice mastery, as observed in this study, solely to differences in educational level. Further research is needed to resolve this issue.

There were no significant differences in mean scores in overall job satisfaction between the two groups. Eighty-eight percent of undergraduates were somewhat or very satisfied with their jobs, 79% of the graduate workers were also somewhat or very satisfied with their jobs. However, to state that one is relatively satisfied with one's job, does not necessarily mean that there are no problems on the job, as further analyses will show.

There were no significant between group differences in mean scores on almost all the variables related to organizational stress, namely role ambiguity, workload, challenge on the job, financial rewards, and role conflict. This suggests that both groups have similar perceptions of the levels of work stress, even though they have different levels of educational training. One exception is that graduate workers perceive significantly less promotional fairness on the job than undergraduate workers. This concern of graduate workers about promotional fairness has been noted in previous research, and clearly signifies that agency policies need to be examined for possible ambiguity, unfairness and bias (Himle, Jayaratne & Chess, 1986).

While it is of importance to compare the mean scores on the study variables between these two groups of workers, it is the basic purpose of this paper to examine the relative strength of association between the study variables *within* each group, especially since it is difficult to assess the significance of mean

score differences based on educational differences alone, since a precise discrimination between the absolute content of academic training offered each group is difficult, and due to the fact that there were significant differences in age, gender, and length of time in position between these two samples. Therefore, Table 2 presents the results of a series of standardized multiple regression analysis for each worker group.

Table 2

Standardized Regression Analyses of Factors Influencing Job Satisfaction, and Burnout

Factors	Undergraduate Workers	Graduate Workers
Job Satisfaction		
Age	.01	.10*
Sex	.08	-.01
Time in Position	-.13	-.10
Role Ambiguity	-.16	-.07
Workload	.09	-.01
Challenge	.47**	.42**
Financial Reward	.23*	.17**
Promotion	.12	.21**
Role Conflict	-.11	-.04
Knowledge Mastery	-.25*	-.03
Practice Mastery	.09	-.00
	R ² =.50	R ² =.45
Emotional Exhaustion		
Age	.02	-.20**
Sex	-.10	.04
Time in Position	-.08	.12**
Role Ambiguity	.29**	.10*
Workload	.16	.09
Challenge	-.14	-.11*
Financial Reward	-.11	-.09
Promotion	.06	-.05
Role Conflict	.07	.20**
Knowledge Mastery	.36**	.02
Practice Mastery	-.20	.03
	R ² =.25	R ² =.19

Depersonalization		
Age	-.24*	-.14*
Sex	.01	-.03
Time in Position	-.08	-.00
Role Ambiguity	.20	.04
Work Load	.11	-.05
Challenge	-.17	-.28**
Financial Reward	.07	.04
Promotion	.05	-.04
Role Conflict	.07	.17**
Knowledge Mastery	.24	-.02
Practice Mastery	-.31*	-.03
	R ² =.30	R ² =.19
Personal Accomplishment		
Age	.07	.07
Sex	.02	-.09*
Time in Position	-.04	.02
Role Ambiguity	-.22*	-.13*
Work Load	.07	.03
Challenge	.47**	.30**
Financial Reward	.09	-.01
Promotion	-.42**	-.02
Role Conflict	-.14	-.05
Knowledge Mastery	.15	.03
Practice Mastery	.21	.24**
	R ² =.51	R ² =.28

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

In these regression models job satisfaction and burnout are treated as dependent variables, and the work stress and competency variables as independent (predictor) variables. This method of analysis has been used frequently in the literature on burnout (Cohen & Ashby-Wills, 1985; Shinn, Rosario, March, Chestnut, 1984; Etzion, 1984).

Since Maslach and Jackson (1981) have reported age and gender differences in the use of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, and since we observed similar demographic difference in our samples, we included the age, gender, and length of time in present position, as control variables in the separate regression equations. Agency setting was not included, since it was examined and accounted for a minimal amount of variation in the equations.

Table 2 shows the difference beta weights (predictors) which the various work stressors and the issue of competence have in association with the dimensions of job satisfaction, and burnout for each group, and the R^2 scores (explained variance) for each model.

Knowledge Mastery and Practice Competence

Perceived knowledge mastery and practice competence were significant predictors of job dissatisfaction, and burnout in four instances out of a possible sixteen instances in both groups. Three of the four instances were among undergraduate workers. Of the work stressors, job challenge, financial reward, role ambiguity, and promotional fairness were significant predictors of job satisfaction and burnout in the undergraduate sample, and in the graduate sample the same significant predictors of job satisfaction and burnout were present, with the addition of role conflict.

Job Satisfaction

Among undergraduates, knowledge mastery had a significant inverse relationship to job satisfaction. This is an unusual finding, and we can only speculate that as social work knowledge increases among this group, individuals are less satisfied because of the limitations in the use of such knowledge in their present position.

Burnout

The finding, mentioned above, of an inverse relationship between knowledge mastery and job satisfaction was further supported by the finding that knowledge mastery was *positively* associated with the emotional exhaustion aspect of burnout among undergraduates. Therefore, the finding by Harrison (1983) that the perception of a lack of general practice competence is central to the development of burnout, is not supported in this study. In fact, knowledge mastery may actually contribute to the increase of burnout, especially if such knowledge is in conflict with agency practice, policy or delivery of services.

On the other hand, practice mastery was inversely related to depersonalization among undergraduates. In this case, competence was actually associated with a reduced aspect of burnout. Practice mastery was also positively associated with another aspect of burnout, namely personal accomplishment, among graduate workers. These two findings support the contention that practice competence can reduce aspects of burnout. It is therefore important that workers be asked about their specific practice and knowledge development needs, and that education programs be provided.

Therefore, within these samples, it appears that practice competency may not be a general panacea for the reduction of burnout, but selectively helpful or harmful, depending on which aspect of competency is being measured, and which group of workers is examined. The different effects of knowledge mastery and practice competence on job satisfaction and burnout is illustrative of this. Further research needs to be done to examine the broader aspects of knowledge development and practice skill training and their effects of burnout, which have not been addressed in this study.

Job Challenge

The variable most positively associated with job satisfaction and the reduction of burnout in both groups was job challenge. To assess the level of challenge on the job, workers could be given special training to monitor and evaluate the results of their work with clients through the utilization of single-subject research methodology, such as suggested by Jayaratne and Levy (1979), Thomas (1978), Bloom and Fischer (1982), and Sowers-Hoag & Thyer (1987).

General Work Stressors

Among the graduate group, work related stressors such as role conflict, and role ambiguity were significant predictors of burnout among the graduate workers on the dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment, and on the personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion burnout subscales among undergraduates. These

predictors were especially significant among younger workers. The large number of work related stressors which contributed to burnout in this study, should caution against attributing a single variable, such as competency, as either the cause of burnout, or the sole target for change in the reduction of burnout.

It is also of interest that promotional fairness was a significant issue for both groups. It was inversely associated with the perception of personal accomplishment among undergraduates. This is an unusual finding. We can only speculate that whatever promotional opportunities might have been available were not perceived as contributing to a sense of personal accomplishment. Further research is needed to examine this issue.

Among graduate workers promotional fairness was positively associated with job satisfaction. Promotional fairness has been an important concern for many workers, since evidence of gender and other types of discrimination in promotional practices related to social workers has been pointed out in a number of studies (Fanshel, 1976; Sutton, 1982; Himle, Jayaratne & Thyness, 1986).

Conclusion

The initial analysis of between group differences in this study presented some important findings. First, the undergraduate workers in this sample reported significantly higher levels of depersonalization and lower levels of knowledge mastery and practice mastery than graduate workers. Therefore, administrators of social service agencies should provide opportunities for these workers to upgrade their knowledge and skill through extensive programs of continuing education, and the kind of supervisory support which stresses skill and knowledge development. This may be a high priority task among undergraduate workers, since they reported a significantly lower perception of personal accomplishment than did graduate workers.

Secondly, the within-group regression analyses suggested that knowledge mastery, an aspect of practice competency, was not always associated with increased job satisfaction and a reduction in burnout. In fact, knowledge mastery was associated with a decrease in job satisfaction and an increase in burnout, among undergraduate workers. However, practice mastery was

a significant predictor of increased job satisfaction and decreased burnout in both groups, as we have noted. Therefore, it is important that further research be done to examine the issue of knowledge mastery and practice mastery as moderators of burnout, in view of these findings. It may be that social work knowledge needs to be taught with a greater emphasis on the realities of the workplace, the limitations of the often complex social service bureaucracy, and the constraints of social welfare policy, mental health legislation, and public and private funding, rather than on idealistic and untested models of service delivery. Further research needs to be done to ascertain what specific aspects of knowledge development contribute to burnout.

Since practice mastery was found to moderate certain aspects of burnout, this finding could stimulate the development of a practice model that directly targets the problems of worker burnout, in addition to client problems, so that the negative effects of burnout and job dissatisfaction could be modified by both preventive and remedial coping skills which are an integral part of practice training.

The within group regression analysis have also shown that potential work stressors, other than perceived competency, such as role ambiguity, role conflict, financial rewards and promotional fairness were also strongly related to burnout and job dissatisfaction, thus minimizing the impact of practice competency as a primary or sole causal factor, or primary remedial intervention for burnout. Therefore, it may be a mistake to concentrate solely on the competency issue in the reduction of burnout, to the neglect of organizational change which can reduce the negative effect of a variety of work stressors, such as examined in this study and other studies (Bramhall & Ezell, 1981; Zastrow, 1984; Shinn, Rosario, March, & Chestnut, 1984).

In general, these findings lend some support for Streepy's (1981) arguments that specific practice training and education be provided for workers who are experiencing burnout and job dissatisfaction. However, interventions which target only practice competency or knowledge mastery are unlikely to be successful in reducing burnout, since a variety of occupational and organizational work stressors are also highly associated with burnout.

What is really needed is a combination of in-service practice skill development and appropriate knowledge development along with organizational changes that promote greater job challenge, promotional fairness, and role clarification and specificity. Since burnout has been defined as a multi-faceted concept which includes many aspects of the workers' response to a variety of work stressors, based on the results of this study, the reduction of burnout will probably be accomplished by only by multiple interventions which address a variety of such problems among workers, and especially among workers with different levels of training (Maslach, 1982). This broad approach to the lingering problem of burnout will probably be more productive than an unwarranted concentration on a few aspects of worker competency, which have been found to be associated with burnout.

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