

Social Work and Older People

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Howard Litwin, The professional standing of work with elderly persons among social work trainees. *British Journal of Social Work*, 24 (1994), 53–69.

This article reports on a random sample of 93 students of social work in Israel who were questioned about their perception of the professional standing of social work with older people. It identifies the trainees' ranking of this field of practice along with the factors most associated with a positive perception. A useful literature review is supplied for the reader sceptical of the value of social work with older people. This attitude arises from negative perceptions of the client group (a glimpse of the difficulties to be faced in later life); inadequate understanding of the professional task (case-management is seen as indirect work, hence of secondary status to counselling); and a feeling of insufficient reward and accomplishment resulting from gerontological practice (in other words professional suicide).

Turning to the methodology, the authors describe the sample as predominantly female, Arab, with an average age of 22 years. The dependent variable, the professional standing of social work with older people, is operationalized as a series of statements characterizing the field of practice, as represented in the literature review. Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed with each statement on a five-point scale. A series of independent variables included the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample, training factors, value-orientations and peer-perceptions.

Readers will not be surprised to learn that respondents rated this field of practice fairly low. The sample did not see gerontological practice as professional work, regarded career options as limited and presented the social work task as mainly indirect work of a technical and administrative nature, the latter being the most important negative effect. The most influential single factor in a positive evaluation was a traditional value orientation to the role of older people in society. The authors conclude that proper education and training can substantiate the understanding of the social work task with older adults as a professional role of considerable complexity. Even peer-perception can be enhanced through a range of organisational effort, training incentives and the wider diffusion of gerontological knowledge.

John E. Poulin and Carolyn A. Walter, Burnout in gerontological social work. *Social Work*, 38, 3 (1993), 305–310.

There is a dearth of research on gerontological social workers' experience with burnout. As the authors of this paper point out, however, there is a growing body of evidence in the United States which suggests that work with elderly clients produces emotional stress. Poulin and Walter describe the extent to which gerontological social workers experience the three components of burnout as defined by Maslach and Johnson (1981). They describe burnout as a state of emotional exhaustion, increased depersonalization of clients and decreased feelings of personal accomplishment.

The authors contacted a random sample of 3,000 members of the National Association of Social Workers who were listed as working with older people and all 1,200 social work members of The Gerontological Society of America. The study was undertaken in 1989. Of the 1,196 social workers in the final sample, the majority were white, female and aged between 30 and 49 years. Seventy-eight per cent had a Masters or a higher degree. The majority were employed in private non-profit organisations; 27 per cent were in government agencies. The study respondents had been working in gerontology for an average of 8.1 years. Along with Maslach's burnout variables, predictor variables are described and measured in the study. These include organisational variables (job autonomy, perceived job stress, adequacy of organisational resources and supervision support), client variables (client functioning, percentage of time spent with clients and satisfaction with clients) and personal variables (health status, age, gender, number of hours worked per week and self esteem). On the burnout scores, three out of ten experienced moderate to high levels of client depersonalisation. Although the majority derived a sense of personal accomplishment from their jobs, 26 per cent had high emotional exhaustion scores and another 34 per cent reported moderate levels of emotional exhaustion. As the authors point out, failure to address this issue could have adverse effects on the quality of services provided to elderly clients and on the retention of social workers.

No single predictor of burnout was identified but low worker autonomy and job stress were significant predictors of depersonalisation, emotional exhaustion and lack of personal accomplishment. Giving workers control over decision-making, reducing job stress and time pressure as well as support from management were identified as crucial. Self-esteem was the personal factor with the greatest effect on burnout. Promoting workers sense of worth and competence, especially in dealing with difficult decisions was considered important. Age also

was influential, with older respondents tending to experience lower levels of burnout than younger respondents.

COMMENT

Although these articles are drawn from Israel and the United States, they are applicable and relevant to professional social work in Britain. Readers unfamiliar with this area of gerontology may be forgiven for thinking that the current emphasis on community care has promoted social work with older people. Despite the numerous publications on community care and older people in recent years, the promotion of care management and the emphasis on community care as a core module in social work courses, the news continues to be depressing. From a study commissioned by *The Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work* on the employment of newly qualified social workers in June 1993, the findings illustrate that working with children and families is the main and preferred area of work, particularly for qualified workers on a post-graduate course (Lyons and La Valle, 1993). At the other end of the continuum, experienced workers in the field are voicing concern over higher case-loads, lack of client contact, increasing bureaucratization and a feeling of being swamped by the changes in the community care field (Jones, 1993). In the welfare state of the 1990s, social work as a whole, and work with older people in particular, has been left without direction as well as resources. The role, skills and knowledge-base appear to have shifted, with the social worker increasingly being the gate-keeper to resources, filling in assessment forms and ticking boxes as a part of their needs-led assessments. The core knowledge base of the 1960s and 1970s in social work, with its emphasis on psycho-social theories and radical social work, have long disappeared leaving an intellectual and theoretical vacuum.

The two articles reviewed do however convey hope; both conclude on positive approaches and lessons for management and educational establishments. Poulin and Walter believe there is potential for the status of work with older people to increase. Efforts must be made by management to increase the self-esteem of those working in the field of gerontology, and support is vital along with reduced job stress. I would add that education and training to substantiate the social work task with older adults is also crucial – with a focus not only on values but also on the content of working with people. Social workers facing situations of elder abuse, for example, need to understand the context in which abuse occurs as well as explain why it happens and how to deal with it. The use of social work research with older people deserves

greater emphasis in teaching. Without a research background social workers are unable to develop practice theory or to make sense of their aims. With an increasing elderly population and community care high on the welfare agenda, to render the tasks manageable and to acknowledge social workers' skills, there is a need for highly-skilled and committed staff and for supportive management. These two articles identify the first steps towards these goals.

References

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