

The Relationship between Work Environment Factors and Job Satisfaction Among Rural Behavioral Health Professionals

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated organizational factors as predictors of Job Satisfaction among 742 staff employed by rural behavioral health agencies. Results indicated that the organizational factors of Support, Involvement and Innovation contributed significantly to 11 dimensions of job satisfaction among rural behavioral health professional and paraprofessional staff.

INTRODUCTION

Low levels of job satisfaction and high rates of burnout and attrition are common among behavioral health providers serving challenging patient populations (Bingham, Valenstein, Blow & Alexander, 2002). This is especially true in rural areas where behavioral health workers appear to be at higher risk of burnout and job attrition (Massad, 2005). DeStefano, Clark, Potter and Gavin, (2005) found that 90% of rural behavioral health workers in Arizona had been with a health provider agency for 7 years or less, with 73% in their first three years. Osborn (2004) suggests this high rate of burnout and attrition may be due to the fact that behavioral health providers are inundated with numerous demands on their time, talents, and resources. Although work environment as it relates to job satisfaction has been studied in a variety of occupational settings, little research has been conducted in behavioral health settings, and, more specifically, rural behavioral health settings. Because staff attrition is a significant problem within rural behavioral centers, more research is needed in the area of work environment factors and job satisfaction. Based on the following literature, a range of work environment factors have been found to influence job satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

Savicki and Cooley (1987) investigated work environment factors associated with burnout in mental health professionals. Work environments associated with high burnout were those that required adherence to work through restriction of worker freedom and that deemphasized planning and efficiency. Higher levels of burnout were also associated with vague job expectations, extensive rules and regulations, and minimal support of new ideas and procedures. Conversely, low levels of burnout were associated with environments in which employees were dedicated to their work, co-worker relationships were encouraged, and supervisory relationships were supportive.

A study by de Frias and Schaie (2001) found significant differences in perceived work environment based on age, gender, and occupation type. Employees aged 50-56 had the highest perceived autonomy, control, and innovation in the workplace. Men, in all occupation types but blue collar, tended to have a higher perception of the work environment. Lastly, employees in managerial positions had the highest perceived levels of autonomy, control, and innovation in the workplace.

Several key theoretical models of job satisfaction, from the need-satisfaction model to the stress-strain-outcome model may be helpful in understanding these workforce issues in rural areas. According to Salancik and Pfeffer (1977), the need-satisfaction model suggests that persons have basic, stable, relatively unchanging identifiable attributes, including needs. Also, the model posits that jobs have a stable, identifiable set of characteristics that are relevant to those needs of individuals. Job attitudes and motivation are presumed to result from the association between the person's needs and the job characteristics. Thus, when the needs of the individual are compatible with the job's characteristics, it is presumed that the person is satisfied and more motivated to perform the job. In other words, jobs that fulfill a person's needs are satisfying and those that do not are not satisfying.

Several models of work stress are described by Schwartz, Pickering, & Landsbergis (1996). First, the authors describe the Person-Environment Fit Model, which is based on the premise that it may be possible to match individuals to environments in such a way as to reduce overall levels of stress and hence increase job satisfaction. Second, Schwartz et al. describe the Demand-Control Model, or job strain model. This model is composed of two dimensions: psychological job demands and job control. According to this model, those with decision latitude or control in their job have greater flexibility to decide how best to meet the demands of their job and are therefore predicted to experience little or no distress. Lastly, the authors describe the Effort-Reward Model, which is closely related to the job strain model, but with a more sociological focus. This model also has two components, effort and reward, and it is hypothesized that the combination of high effort and low reward is likely to cause distress.

In an attempt to develop a stress-strain-outcome model of job satisfaction, Um & Harrison (1998) examined role stressors, burnout, individual coping skills, social support, and level of workers' job dissatisfaction among clinical social workers. Using linear structural relation model (LISREL) strategy to specify a model in terms of presumed cause-and-effect variables and their indicators, the results suggest that role conflict intensifies burnout and is a significant source of job stress in the social work field.

Karasek & Theorell (1990) further developed their job strain model into what is now considered the Job Demand-Control-Support model. Expanding upon the original two-dimensional model, the authors add a third dimension: social support. This model states that the most unfavorable job-related strain reactions are to be predictable in jobs characterized by high job demands, low decision latitude, and low worksite support (Pelfrene, Vlerick, Mak, De Smet, Kornitzer, & De Backer, 2001).

Although work environment as it relates to job satisfaction has been studied in a variety of occupational settings, little research has been conducted in rural behavioral health settings where attrition is a significant problem.

METHODOLOGY

This study focused on the relationship between job satisfaction as measured by the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) and work environment as measured by the Work Environment Scale (WES).

Participants

Participants in this assessment project included 742 paraprofessional and professional staff including 221 Therapists and Social Workers, 121 Case Managers, 242 Behavioral Health Technicians and paraprofessionals, 17 Psychiatrists, 37 Nurses and 104 program directors and administrators. This sample consisted of 214 males (28.8%), 510 females (68.7%), with 18 not reporting gender (2.5%). The age ranged between 21 and 72 years of age with an average age of 42.5 years. This sample was comprised of 517 Caucasians (69.67), 21 African Americans (2.8%), 75 Hispanic Americans (10.1%), 22 Native Americans (2.9%), 4 Asian/Pacific Islanders (.5%), 16 participants self-identified as being multicultural (2.1%), 12 reported other (1.6%) and 75 participants did not identify their ethnicity (10.1%).

Participants were employees of rural behavioral health agencies funded by the state of Arizona Department of Behavioral Health. All participation was voluntary. The assessment of organizational factors on job satisfaction was conducted as part of a larger project which also explored areas of employee burnout, attrition, retention and other human resource issues (DeStefano, Clark, & Potter, 2005).

Instruments

Demographic Questionnaire. A demographic questionnaire was designed to collect relevant background information on position title, agency, sex, ethnicity, and age of participants.

The Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire. The Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) developed by Weiss, Davis, London & Lofquist (1967) is a 100-item measure of Job Satisfaction. There are 20 sub-scales with 5 items each. The 20 sub-scales are as follows: Ability Utilization, Achievement, Activity, Advancement, Authority, Company policies and practices, Compensation, Coworkers, Creativity, Independence, Moral values, Recognition, Responsibility, Security, Social service, Social status, Supervision-human relations, Supervision-technical, Variety, and Working conditions. All items are answered utilizing a 5-point Likert scale. The MSQ data may indicate what reinforcers in the work setting are satisfactory and which ones may need to be adjusted or changed.

Reliability was established using Hoyt correlations, which ranged from .97-.59 for all factors. The median values were .93 to .78. Of 567 coefficients 83% were .80 and above with 2.5% lower than .70. Stability was established using 1-week test-retest reliabilities (coefficients ranging from .66 to .91, median .83) and 1 year test-retest reliabilities (coefficients ranging from .35 to .71). A canonical correlation retest analysis yielded a one-week coefficient of .97 and 1-year coefficient of .89, both significant at .001 levels.

The Work Environment Scales: The Real Form (WES). The WES, developed by Moos (1994), is a 90 item instrument designed to measure an employee's perception of their current work environment. All 90 items are answered as true or false. The WES measures three dimensions: Relationship, Personal Growth, and System Maintenance and Change, and ten sub-scales; Involvement, Coworker Cohesion, Supervisor Support, Autonomy, Task Orientation, Work Pressure, Clarity, Managerial Control, Innovation, and Physical Comfort.

Test-retest reliability was determined with 75 workers in four work groups. The range of reliabilities was .69 for clarity to .83 for Involvement. Stability was measured by re-testing from 1 to 10 years. The 1-year coefficients ranged from .55 to .64. The 10-year range is .32 to .56. The 10 sub-scales inter-correlate but also measure distinct aspects of work environment. Inter-correlations were shown to account for less than 10% of the sub-scale variance. The internal consistencies of the sub-scales varied from .66 to .84 for Nurses and from .60 to .84 for teachers

RESULTS

Because each of the instruments involves multiple scales, individual stepwise regressions were conducted using scores on the WES as predictors of the different components of job satisfaction (MSQ). A summary of significant predictors for each MSQ scale, along with variance accounted for and f-ratios is presented in Table 1.

Each of the 10 subscales of the WES occurred as a significant predictor for at least one component of job satisfaction. However, two of the WES subscales, Control and Work Pressure, never accounted for more than 2% of the variance on any MSQ subscale. Three subscales of the WES (Support, Involvement and Innovation) accounted for 2% or more of the variance in job satisfaction 11 times each. No other WES subscale accounted for 2% or more of the variance in any job satisfaction scale more than 3 times. Support (range from 3% to 44.6% of variance accounted for) was the primary predictor of satisfaction for 6 of the individual subscales of the MSQ, as well as for the composite General Satisfaction scale (32.7% of variance accounted for). Involvement (range from 3% to 14.7% of variance accounted for) also occurred as the primary predictor of satisfaction for 6 of the subscales of the MSQ, and as a secondary predictor of General Satisfaction (an additional 9% of variance accounted for.) Innovation (range from 2% to 25.7% of variance accounted for) occurred as the primary predictor on three subscales of the MSQ, and as the tertiary predictor of General Satisfaction (an additional 3.3% of variance accounted for). These three work environment variables accounted for 45% of the variance in General Satisfaction.

Table 1

Results of Stepwise Multiple Regressions for Predicting Job Satisfaction with Work Environment Factors

Job Satisfaction Scale	R2 Total	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6	Step 7
Autonomy	.198***	Inv. .147***	Inn. .040***	Aut. .011***				
Achievement	.140***	Inv .103***	Inn .027***	Aut .009**	Com .005*			
Activity	.120***	Inv .100***	Inn .020***					
Advancement	.280***	Sup .189***	Inv .056***	Inn .020***	WP .009**	Cla .005*		
Authority	.149***	Inn .113***	Sup .030***	Inv .010**				
Comp. Policies	.536***	Cla .375***	Sup .108***	Inn .022***	TO .010***	WP .014***	Com .007***	Inv .003*
Compensation	.153***	Sup .085***	Com .032***	Inv .019***	WP .017***			
Co-Workers	.308***	Coh .270***	Inv .031***	TO .008**				
Creativity	.350***	Inn .257***	Aut .078***	Inv .011***	WP .003*			
Independence	.067***	Aut .053***	Inv .014***					
Moral Values	.163***	Inv .107***	Sup .035***	Inn .015***	Cla .006*			
Recognition	.443***	Sup .390***	Inn .030***	Inv .016***	Cla .004*	Aut .003*		
Respect	.290***	Aut .220***	Inv .049***	Inn .017***	Sup .004*			
Security	.286***	Sup .219***	Cla .028***	Coh .018***	Aut .010***	WP .005*	Inv .005*	
Social Service	.105***	Inv .089***	Inn .016***					
Social Status	.154***	Inv .100***	Inn .030***	WP .013***	TO .006*	Com .005*		
Supervision-HR	.486***	Sup .446***	TO .028***	WP .006**	Inn .006**			
Supervision-Tech	.450***	Sup .386***	Cla .034***	Inn .014***	Con .009***	Inv .007**		
Variety	.231***	Inn .161***	Inv .058***	Aut .012***				
Work Conditions	.439***	Com .374***	Sup .038***	Inn .011***	WP .009***	Inv .008***		
Gen. Satisfaction	.486***	Sup .327***	Inv .090***	Inn .033***	Cla .017***	Com .009***	Aut .006**	WP .004**

.***p<.001 **p<.01 *p<.05

Implications for Rural Behavioral Health

While all of the components of work environment as measured by the Work Environment Scale emerged as significant predictors of some aspect of job satisfaction, it seems clear that three work environment variables, Support, Involvement and Innovation, were the most consistent and potent predictors of job satisfaction. The data indicate that rural behavioral health workers want to be involved and to find effective ways to deliver services to clients, and increasing feelings of investment are associated with increased job satisfaction. This is reflected in the observation that increased feelings of involvement and the ability to use innovative approaches were significant predictors of every component of job satisfaction.

The support of one's supervisor is also a critical component of job satisfaction. This was evident in the relationship between satisfaction with supervisor support and both current aspects of job satisfaction (Compensation, Recognition, and both Technical and HR Supervision), and future prospects (perceptions of Advancement). Support was also the single best predictor of General Satisfaction accounting for almost a third of the variance.

In addition to noting what work environment factors are important determinants of job satisfaction, it is also important to note what factors appear to be less important. Although providing behavioral health services in rural settings can be extremely stressful, the stress associated with work pressures does not appear to be a major determinant of job satisfaction. While Work Pressure did occur as a significant predictor of 8 scales of the MSQ, it never entered before the fourth step and never accounted for more than 1.7% of the variance in any scale. Work Pressure accounted for only .4% of the variance in General Satisfaction. This seems to indicate that rural behavioral health workers are willing to accept work pressure as part of the job, and that they look to other factors as a source of job satisfaction.

In applying the results of this study to the theoretical models of job satisfaction the data suggests that rural behavioral health workers have high occupational needs for supervisory support, a sense of involvement in the workplace, and the opportunity to practice in a creative and innovative manner. When these occupational needs are met then higher levels of job satisfaction are reported

The data also supports the premise of the Stress-Strain Outcome Model (Um, & Harrison, 1998) and the Demand-Control Model (Schwartz, Pickering, & Landsbergis, 1996). Those behavioral health workers who experience a greater sense of involvement in the workplace and greater latitude and innovation on how to approach their work tasks may experience less job strain and therefore report higher levels of job satisfaction. These results also support Karasek and Theorell's (1990) contention that social support (or more specifically from this study supervisory support) may also reduce job strain and thus increase one's report of job satisfaction. These workplace factors of supervisory support, innovation and involvement may in some ways inoculate rural mental health staff from the workplace stress and strain of high caseloads and the severity of client problems often reported in rural areas.

Results from this study also support Savicki's and Cooley's (1987) contention that worker freedom or a sense of being able to approach one's tasks in an innovative manner is negatively correlated with Burnout.

Limitations of this Assessment.

Important limitations are inherent in an assessment of this kind. First, because the survey instruments utilized in this assessment were self-report measures, information presented by participants is based upon their subjective perceptions. Although participants were assured confidentiality, it is possible that they either over- or under-reported their level of level of satisfaction on the MSQ, and their assessment of the environment on the WES. Second, even with the high level of participation in this assessment the possibility exists that individuals choosing not to participate in the assessment may have differed in some manner from those staff members who did in fact participate.

Recommendations

With job burnout and attrition rates a major concern for rural behavioral health providers, it is important to consider ways to help build job satisfaction. While one should be cautious in drawing causal implications from correlational data, it seems logical that behavioral health agencies should consider ways to:

1. Involve staff in a cooperative, team approach allowing for consideration of ways to improve services or agency procedures.
2. Ensure a positive, supportive relationship between rural behavioral health workers and their supervisors.

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