

## Determinants of Job Satisfaction among the Social Workers

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**Abstract:** This study analyses the determinants of job satisfaction among a sample of social workers. Factors determining variance in levels of job satisfaction were investigated using mean job satisfaction scores. The analysis uses six independent variables (age, career tenure, job tenure, sex, salary and whether they were in private practice or worked for an agency/organization). A number of these variables were found to have an effect on the level of job satisfaction experienced by this sample of social workers.

**Key words:** Job satisfaction, social workers, job tenure, salary age, sex, Texas

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### INTRODUCTION

The job satisfaction of social workers has been a much explored topic (Arches, 1991; Butler, 1990; Pavalko, 2008; Orpen, 1979). This research will investigate several sources of job satisfaction of social workers which have been suggested by the literature.

The most consistent finding in research on age differences in job satisfaction generally is that older workers are more satisfied with their jobs than are younger workers (Butler, 1990; Hulin and Smith, 1965; Janson and Martin, 1982; Lee and Wilburn, 1985; Quinn and Shepard, 1994).

There are three widely held explanations for the cause of this process. They include cohort, life cycle and chronological age (Janson and Martin, 1982; Kalleberg and Loscocco, 2003). A cohort explanation states that the relationship between age and satisfaction is the result of generational differences in education and value systems. According to the life cycle approach, older workers are more satisfied because they moved into better positions. This perspective is based on the logical assumption that older workers have more job and career tenure than younger workers. Finally, Kalleberg and Loscocco (2003) added that chronological age which supports the theory that older workers' adaptation to their jobs is a viable defense for an older workers' increased satisfaction.

In chronological age theory, Kalleberg and Loscocco (2003) state that old people tend to withdraw from society and limit their emotional involvement in the activities which were once important to them in their earlier careers. Particular aspects of the job, specifically challenge and autonomy may seem less important to the workers which would then result in higher levels of job satisfaction. In other words, they adapt their previous values to the

realities of their jobs. However, younger workers expect much more from their jobs, especially if they are highly educated. Therefore when they get in a position, their expectations do not fit the realities of their job.

Cohort explanations help to explain the different values of older and younger workers. Intrinsic and financial rewards seem to be valued by the younger workers while older workers may place greater emphasis on the morality of their work. In this case, the different birth cohorts may have different socialization experiences and this may contribute to their diverse conceptions of what is acceptable with respect to work (Janson and Martin, 1982; Kalleberg and Loscocco, 2003).

The life cycle defense for job satisfaction follows the effects job tenure can place on workers. It has been suggested that younger workers placed in boring and repetitive entry level positions at the beginning of their career could possibly find themselves in a much more interesting and fulfilling job at the age of 50 (Janson and Martin, 1982). Jayaratne and Chess (1986) have stated that the average social worker changes jobs every 2 years. This may be the reason why older workers are more satisfied since, they would be more likely to have a stable and secure job. Whereas younger workers are searching for the best opportunity to arise. After finding a job, the young worker must face the task of determining organizational performance expectations, understanding how to relate to other co-workers, determining work goals and managing the conflicts of life outside of his or her job. Furthermore, Lee and Wilburn (1985) and others have suggested three additional views about the relationship between job satisfaction and age. First, a U-shaped function which postulates that satisfaction decreases initially and then increases with age. Second, a theory that indicates job satisfaction increases in a positive linear fashion when age is concerned (Hulin and Smith, 2005).

Finally, many researchers have stated that there is a positive and linear trend in satisfaction until a terminal period that is marked by a significant decline in job satisfaction (Carrell and Elbert, 2004; Lee and Wilburn, 1985; Saleh and Otis, 1964).

Beyond these theories, there are some other factors that seem to be linked to age. These factors include job tenure, educational level, gender, autonomy level and salary (Bamundo and Kopelman, 2000). For example, job tenure plays a part in the adjustment of older workers' expectations to the returns their work can provide. Salary is positively correlated with job satisfaction for all occupational groups and is usually associated with job/career tenure and age.

Job satisfaction of social workers has been linked with the type of practice the workers are involved. According to a report by NASW (1997), the proportion of social workers in full-time private practice increased >500% from <3% in 1972 to >15% in 1997. Approximately, one-third of the current NASW membership is engaged in some form (full or part time) of private practice. Many researchers view, the trend toward private practice as reflective of economic needs; dissatisfaction with agency policies and procedures and a general desire by practitioners to gain control over their working conditions including control over the types of clients they serve (Abramovitz, 1986; Reichert, 1982; Saxon, 1988).

Bureaucracy has become a powerful method of control, centralization and coordination of large numbers of workers in one location. It is possible to use a conflict perspective when analyzing the role of agency practice and bureaucracy. Those in power tend to protect their monopoly through forms of control such as licensure and vendorship while those without power respond with unionization hence, conflict and change (Arches, 1991). Therefore, these agency workers may experience less satisfaction with their jobs.

Differences in stress levels have been found across practice settings. Jayaratne and Chess (1986) found that those in private practice fare better physically and psychologically than their counterparts in public agencies. This is probably due to their increased autonomy levels and selective clients. However, the agency worker may experience loss of control over the workplace brought by agency structures and demands and by related cost containment measures that may result in a less challenging work environment and assembly-line service (Jayaratne *et al.*, 1988). Private practitioners spend more time in direct work with clients whereas the bureaucratic demands of agency practice reduces the contact between worker and client. Social workers have

been labeled a semi-profession along with nurses and school teachers. These professions are female dominated. Males in these jobs generally have lower levels of self-evaluations of their positions (Ritzer and Walker, 2006). The lower levels of job satisfaction among males in female dominated professions/occupations and females in male dominated professions/occupations has been explained by Hughes (1958) through the use of the concept auxiliary statuses. Hughes pointed out that certain statuses tend to cluster together.

If a person occupies a particular status, there is a high possibility that they will also occupy other particular statuses. For example if a person is an engineer, there is a high probability they will also be male because >90% of engineers are male. Likewise if a person is a nurse or elementary school teacher, there is a high probability that the person will be female. Auxiliary statuses are statistically associated but not necessarily attached. Individuals encounter difficulties if they enter a status but do not possess the proper auxiliary status. People have difficulties becoming integrated with fellow employees and may encounter problems with customers whom the occupation services. Because of this, persons not possessing the proper auxiliary status, tend to exit the profession sooner not be as successful or to enter the profession at all thus, perpetuating the stereotype.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

A survey questionnaire was given to 100 board certified social workers in Dallas county of the State of Texas. Names were obtained from a list of certified social workers supplied by the Texas state Board of Certified Social Work Examiners. Board certification requires 2 years of full time experience (under the supervision of a Board Certified Social Worker) beyond the masters degree and the passing of an examination. The process takes nearly 3 years. This fact is reflected in the sample; none of the sample had <3 years experience. A survey was sent to the population of social workers in the Dallas county. After completion of the questionnaire social workers returned them in a stamped envelope addressed to the researcher. The survey yielded 72 usable questionnaires. This represents >63% of the social workers in Dallas county.

The questionnaire was designed to provide basic professional information and job satisfaction. Information included; private practice or working for an organization, length of time as a social worker (career tenure), years at present position (job tenure), age, salary and sex. All data for this project were collected during Spring, 2011.

Table 1: Mean job satisfaction scores

Parameters	N	Mean JSS
All	72	84.8
<b>Age (years)</b>		
25-34	10	85.0
35-49	44	85.3
50-69	18	83.6
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	21	83.0
Female	51	86.0
<b>Work setting</b>		
Private	28	89.0
Agency	44	82.0
<b>Job tenure (years)</b>		
0-2	21	85.8
3-5	25	87.5
6-29	26	81.1
<b>Career tenure (years)</b>		
3-5	15	86.5
6-20	42	85.6
21-36	15	80.7
<b>Salary</b>		
\$10,000-\$29,999	14	81.1
\$30,000-\$49,999	44	84.1
\$50,000-\$120,000	14	90.5

**Operationalization of the dependent variable:** Job satisfaction was operationalized using a scale developed by Brayfield and Rothe (1951). The scale was developed to measure overall job satisfaction rather than specific aspects of job satisfaction. The scale is considered to be applicable to a wide variety of jobs and is highly correlated with scores on other job satisfaction scales (Miller, 2007). The job satisfaction scale consisted of 18 items with six possible choices for each statement. Eight of the items had to be reversed scored (3, 4, 6, 8, 11, 14, 16 and 18). The highest possible score was 108 indicating high job satisfaction and the lowest possible score was 10 indicating low job satisfaction.

**Operationalization of the independent variables:** As shown in Table 1, there were six independent variables as described in this research as described before. Age had three categories: 25-34 years; 35-49 years; 50-69 years. Work setting was divided into private and agency. Job tenure had three classifications: 0-2 years; 3-5 years; 6-29 years. Career tenure also had three categories: 3-5 years; 6-20 years; 21-36 years. Salary had three divisions: \$10,000-29,999; \$30,000-49,999; \$50,000-120,000. Sex of course had its normal two taxonomies, male and female.

**Techniques of analysis:** The examination of the relative influence of the independent variables or job satisfaction is accomplished through the use of mean job satisfaction scores within the categories of the independent variables.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As shown in Table 1, the mean level of job satisfaction was 84.8. This represents a moderately high level of job satisfaction among this sample of social workers. All of the respondents had at least a masters degree. Since, education is highly correlated with occupational status, one would expect to find high levels of job satisfaction among this group. But the focus of this paper is on the organizational determinants of variance within the sample.

Job Satisfaction (JSS) decreased for older social workers. Those of 25-34 years had a mean JSS of 85.0 while it virtually stayed the same for 35-49 year olds who had a JSS of 85.3. But for the oldest group (50-69 years of age), the JSS decreased to 83.6. Males had a lower JSS (83.0) than females (86.0). Social workers in private practice had higher JSS (89.0) than those working for an agency/organization (82.0). Job tenure affects job satisfaction in a curvilinear fashion. Social workers who were in their present position for 2 years or less had a mean JSS of 85.8; for those with 3-5 years, JSS increased to 87.5. But for those whose present job tenure was 6 or more years, the mean JSS decreased to 81.1.

Career tenure showed a more linear pattern of JSS decline; social workers with career length of 3-5 years had a mean JSS of 86.5; those with 6-20 years had a mean JSS of 85.6 and those with the longest career tenure (21-36 years) had a JSS of 80.7. Salary as expected had a positive effect on job satisfaction. Those who indicated salaries of \$10,000-29,999 had a mean JSS of 81.1; \$30,000-49,999 (84.1) and the highest income group \$50,000-120,000 had a mean JSS of 90.5. These findings demonstrated that salary and private practice spawned high job satisfaction while both long term job and career tenure diminish JSS.

Controlling for type of practice could give us more information about job satisfaction. Researchers chose type of practice for three reasons; it made better sense conceptually, the raw data indicated that most of the individuals in the highest salary category were in private practice and salary had too many categories to control for considering the size of our sample.

Table 2 are the mean JSS controlling for type of practice. Individuals in private practice had higher JSS in every category but two. Twelve of the 14 individuals in the highest income group were in private practice but the highest JSS were for individuals working for agencies within this highest salary group (JSS = 94.0). These two individuals were both administrators. The other category

Table 2: Mean job satisfaction scores by work setting

Parameters	Private		Agency	
	N	Mean JSS	N	Mean JSS
<b>Age (years)</b>				
25-34	0	-	10	85.0
35-49	21	88.7	23	82.1
50-69	7	89.7	11	79.7
<b>Sex</b>				
Male	9	88.1	12	78.4
Female	19	89.4	32	83.5
<b>Job tenure (years)</b>				
0-2	4	92.3	17	84.3
3-5	14	87.6	12	87.4
6-29	10	89.6	15	75.4
<b>Career tenure (years)</b>				
3-5	5	85.2	10	87.1
6-20	20	85.4	22	81.4
21-36	3	86.7	12	79.3
<b>Salary</b>				
\$10,000-\$29,999	5	86.6	9	78.1
\$30,000-\$49,999	11	89.0	33	82.5
\$50,000-\$120,000	12	89.9	2	94.0
All	28	89.0	44	82.0

in which agency had a higher JSS was those just beginning their careers (career tenure) JSS = 87.1 as opposed to individuals in private practice (85.2). Those individuals who enter private practice early in their careers are atypical and probably have a Spartan beginning which persists a few years. Table 2 augments the findings gleaned from Table 1 that is private practice generates higher job satisfaction. While higher salaries certainly produce higher job satisfaction, those with higher incomes are for most part in private practice.

In most professions/occupations, those just starting out tend to be less satisfied than older and/or longtime workers. Among the general working population, younger workers and those at the inception of their careers tend to have the poorer jobs that improve with age/experience as they encounter career mobility. This relationship is a result of the gap between the reality of work and their expectations. Early work experiences in these entry level positions may be disillusioning. As workers age and spend more time on the job, they may come to expect less from their work which may result in higher levels of job satisfaction (Kalleberg and Loscocco, 2003; Pavalko, 2008). Among the samples, the inverse was generally supported by the research on police, nurses and teachers. Controlling for type of practice alters this relationship. Among agency social workers job satisfaction declines with years in the profession. Among those in private practice, job satisfaction increases with career tenure, albeit a slight increase.

Dissatisfaction is not atypical in workers who have been in their careers for a long time and have reached a

plateau in their careers (Burke, 1989). Among police officers, teachers, nurses and dental hygienists, it is not unusual to find that a high level of experience actually reduces one's level of satisfaction. Among teachers, nurses and social workers those who move into administrative positions (they also tend to have higher level of education) have higher level of job satisfaction. The higher level of job satisfaction of administrators could in part be explained by their higher status and increased level of professionalism.

There have been many suggestions for the problem of lower job satisfaction in agency practice. It is noted that social workers should examine whether schools are encouraging students to believe they will enter the field as autonomous professionals (Arches, 1991; Ritzer and Walker, 2006). Most of these students believe and expect high autonomy in agency practice but are rudely awakened after they are in the position. If schools would give viable information, this could relieve the problem between the expectations and realities of a job. With the increased number of workers entering private practice, schools of social work need to re-examine their curricula carefully.

Social workers who are employed in agencies suffer from the lack of autonomy like members of the other semi professions. Hence, a decline of professionalism which is indeed mediated by a private practice. Being a creature of an organization produces barriers to professional recognition, private entrepreneurs are not beholden to administrative superiors. The social worker in a bureaucracy is caught up in this brutal intersection of contradictory values.

## CONCLUSION

This research has founded certain characteristics of the respondents suggested by past research as predictive of job satisfaction. While a full impact of job satisfaction is beyond the scope of this research, studying patterns of job satisfaction is important due to their correlation with important employee behavior, characteristics and the effects on the overall performance on the organization.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Further research should focus on the conventions among these disparate occupations/professions in order to uncover the roots which cultivate this discontent in specific professions and occupations
- Future research should concentrate on reducing the discrepancy between private practice and the historical goal of helping the poor and less fortunate

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