

Leadership Through the Social Work Lens: A Thematic Review

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ABSTRACT

Leadership practices in social work are vital considering that service outcomes do not focus on monetary profit or organizational efficiency but on the betterment of individual lives and society as a whole. However, many social service agencies experience poor management that may lead to job dissatisfaction, burnout and decreased program effectiveness (Hardina, 2005; Mary 2005; Maslach, 2001). This research utilizes initial qualitative analysis from surveys distributed to social work students in baccalaureate social work programs in Pennsylvania to better understand student perceptions of leadership in social work practice. The findings of this manuscript focus specifically on the thematic analysis of perceptions of the role of leadership as it relates to job satisfaction, sustainability in practice and client outcomes. Initial themes uncovered support existing literature that suggests a link between leadership and employee and client outcomes. Additional findings included gaps in leadership curriculum and conflicting views on abilities and functions indicating a need for stronger education in this area for BSW education.

Keywords: bachelor education; burn out; human services; management; sustainability

INTRODUCTION

In almost every facet of industry, leadership and leadership practices are seen as a key priority to ensure positive outcomes for employees and consumers. However, it seems at face value that leadership tends to be overlooked in the social service industry. If decades of research compiled by experts suggest that good leadership is tied to job satisfaction and industry success then imagine the impact that good leadership could have on industry when the business is human lives and the betterment of society. Business schools, Fortune 500 companies and the health care industry concentrate great effort on best practices to develop leadership. Effective leadership can lead to many positive employee and client outcomes including higher performance, greater satisfaction levels, enhanced motivation, increased retention, improved services and customer satisfaction (Kouzes and Posner 2012). Still, little is known about the impact of leadership in the social service sector or how it is introduced and integrated into educational programs for social service providers.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the social work profession currently has over 640,000 employees with social work degrees in the United States, which is expected to grow by 12% over the next decade (2014). This profession is by far one of the fastest growing professions in the United States and employs individuals in the most diverse areas of practice including mental health, corrections, aging, education, child welfare, health care, hospice, and military.

Despite the growth of this workforce, the work is demanding, often characterized as emotional labor and can lead to high turnover, staff shortages, compassion fatigue and burnout and potentially poor client outcomes (DePanfilis and Zlotnik 2008; GAO 2003; Mack 2012). Although those who teach and work in the social service sector recognize that many factors contribute to poor or negative outcomes among employees and clients, increased attention to factors such as leadership and self-care could provide valuable information regarding important steps to sustainability and better outcomes. Researchers

suggest that lack of resources, poor management and poor supervision are strong factors that reduce sustainability in the field (Diaconescu 2015; Knight 2013; Mack 2012). Conversely, research suggests that when employees engage in meaningful leadership practices and have the capacity to recognize their feelings as well as the feelings of others (i.e. emotional intelligence), sustainability and success increase (Kouzes and Posner 2012; Mack 2012). Despite that current social service agencies and accredited social work programs address aspects of leadership, best practices are not known and are not required as a part of social work curricula.

Given the role of social work professionals, it is vital that all efforts are made to provide adequate training and support to ensure best practices. Increased attention to leadership skills and practices will likely aid in sustainability among new and seasoned practitioners. Knowledge of current perceptions among social work students regarding leadership will aid in the development of meaningful use of leadership curricula as well as leadership practice interventions.

The objective of this study is to examine social work student leadership behaviors and perceptions and to further examine gaps in knowledge regarding leadership in social work curriculum. This knowledge can guide educators in how to move forward in the future in order to give students a vision for administrative change to send them off better equipped to take initiative in leadership roles and make ripples in the field.

Leadership

Leadership cannot be defined singularly. There are many theories that conceptualize and operationalize leadership, many of which overlap in an intertwining manner. For this study, leadership is viewed through the framework of Kouzes and Posner (2012). For more than 30 years, the authors have studied leaders around the world and their “personal best” stories. Kouzes and Posner assert that leadership is not an inherent personality trait, but a set of observable skills and behaviors. By this definition, anyone can learn and exemplify the qualities of a leader. They define five specific behaviors that align with “best” leadership practices: modeling the way,

inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Another implication of this outline is that leadership is not reserved for the title-holding administrators in large corporations. In contrast, it is meant for every individual, even the entry-level employees in small non-profit organizations.

It is important for undergraduate students to understand this perspective of leadership. If a singular, authoritarian view of leadership is exercised, this can distort the concept itself. Social service providers may be unaware of their abilities to grow as a leader, and also believe that the behavior of upper-level management is to be sought after for the reason of power holding. This is especially important for the social work profession. When management shows poor leadership behavior, employees feel unheard, unimportant, undervalued, and disposable. This leads to higher rates of burnout and harms client outcomes.

METHODS

This study used a mixed methods approach to understand perceptions of social work undergraduate students on leadership practices in education and practice. A survey developed by the researchers was sent to over 20 Pennsylvania Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredited programs in May 2016. Survey links will continue to be mailed to accredited programs throughout the fall of 2016 to obtain additional responses. Outcomes reported include demographic statistics and qualitative feedback from surveys collected up to September 15, 2016. Additional outcomes will be reported after final survey responses are collected following several more rounds of survey distribution.

The survey consisted of questions developed after the research team conducted a thorough literature review. Questions were aimed at uncovering perceptions of students regarding current practices aimed at promoting and developing leadership skills among BSW students. Analysis included descriptive statistics and thematic analysis of qualitative data. Thematic analysis was used to uncover trends of consistent themes among subjects regarding perceptions about leadership.

Table 1. Student Demographics

Characteristic	N	%
Subjects (n= 48)		
Male	4	8
Female	43	90
Other	1	2
Enrolled Full Time (n=48)		
Race (n=48)		
White	45	94
Black or African American	1	2
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1	2
Other	1	2
Age (n=47)		
19-21	25	
22-24	16	
25-28	4	
36	2	
Work History (n=48)		
No employment	1	2
1-2 years	8	17
2-3 years	4	8
> 3 years	35	73
Practice Concentration (n=48)		
Micro	26	54
Mezzo	15	31
Macro	7	15
1st Generation College Student (n=48)		
Academic Standing (n=48)		
Sophomore	4	8
Junior	15	31
Senior	29	60
GPA (n= 48)		
2.1-2.5	7	15
2.6-3.0	16	33
3.1-3.5	14	29
3.6 or higher	11	23

Thematic analysis of open-ended survey questions included data familiarization, data coding, theme identification and continuous revising of themes and codes as they developed. “Thematic analysis focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of living and/or behavior” (Aronson 1994). Final analysis involved building an argument for choosing themes based on existing literature regarding leadership and social work. Thematic analysis afforded the researchers the opportunity to connect the themes in student leadership experiences to the literature, discovering what barriers may currently exist with social work curriculum and leadership knowledge and behaviors. The study and study survey were approved by the Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania IRB.

RESULTS

A total of 48 participants completed the survey. Analysis of 48 surveys was completed using SPSS and Qualtrics survey outcome analysis. Qualitative data was gathered from open-ended survey questions and further analyzed for categories and themes.

Participant Characteristics

The majority of participants who completed the survey were Caucasian (94%), females (90%) between the ages of 19 and 24 (87%). Four participants were male, and one identified their gender as ‘other’. Minority races were represented by 6% of participants. Many participants (73%) held more than three years of work experience. Also, a majority of participants (91%) were juniors and seniors. Grade point averages were spread across the scale. However, a large portion (62%) fell in the range of a 2.6-3.5 GPA. In terms of practice concentration, the leaning was towards micro-level practice at 54%, with 31% of participants interested in mezzo-level social work, and 15% interested in macro-level social work. As for the specific area of social work that participants were interested in, Children, Youth & Family was the most frequent (67%), followed by Mental Health (52%), Medical (42%), Corrections/Criminal Justice (42%), Communities (40%), Substance Abuse (29%), Military & Veterans (21%), Gerontology (19%), and Policy (10%). Demographic results are provided in Table 1.

Leadership Themes

The researchers coded three different categories of themes that emerged within the surveys; impact of leadership, influences on leadership behavior and activities associated with leadership behaviors. Participant responses highlighted a continuum of limited knowledge about leadership within each theme ranging from uncertainty about what leadership means to the value of leadership in the profession.

Impact: The impact of leadership on the profession and client outcomes. Participant narratives regarding the impact of leadership on the profession and client outcomes ranged from (a) uncertainty about the impact of leadership

skills on sustainability and job satisfaction to (b) recognizing that “inadequate leadership” can result in high rates of burnout, and lower quality of service to clients. The following quotations illustrate students’ perceptions regarding the impact of leadership on practitioners and clients.

“[Inadequate leadership] results in high rates of employee burnout and fatigue, and an impaired ability of organizations to meet their mission.”

“Leadership directly combats compassion fatigue and burn out, two of the greatest inhibitors to providing quality services in this field.”

“Without good leadership, all employees under that leader may feel lost, confused, frustrated, etc.”

Influences: Students’ perceived influences on leadership. Participant narratives regarding influences on leadership ranged from (a) inner circles of family and friends to (b) social work professors, course material and civic engagement. Although many participants recognized some level of leadership influence in their home or personal life, several participants were unable to identify existing leadership influences in their social work programs. The following quotations illustrate students’ perceptions regarding environmental leadership influences.

“There is a Social Work club that allows students to step up and take on leadership roles if they want to.”

“I don’t know of any organizations that establish leadership other than social work club, however, they don’t promote knowledge of leadership.”

“I watched the *example* of others who have and are acting as servant leaders—seeking leadership as a way to serve others instead of as a way to rule over others. I think this is what *empowerment* is all about.”

“I am in my internship now... and I have learned more [about leadership] in a month [at my field placement] than the 2 years of major related classes.”

“...there has been—in my memory—no specific assignment or instance where it was part of my curriculum to take a stand and be a leader. That would be very difficult to incorporate into the curriculum as not everyone

leads in the same way and *not everyone wants to be a leader.*”

Activities: Students perceived internal and external activities associated with leadership.

Participant narratives associated with leadership activities ranged from (a) associating leadership skills as a positive to (b) reporting leadership activities as those not closely related to the social work profession. The following quotations illustrate students’ perceptions regarding the external activities associated with leadership.

“I demonstrate leadership through encouragement.”

“You can succeed with a poor leader, but it makes your job so much harder and less enjoyable.”

“I take charge when needed”

“[I am a] leader when leadership is needed”

“We never really speak about leadership specifically it is always about collaborating”

“Social work and leadership go hand in hand.”

DISCUSSION

Leadership in social work is increasingly important as the field grows. This study takes the first step in better improving leadership training of social workers by seeking to understand the current status of what students at the bachelor level practice, believe, and learn about leadership behaviors.

When analyzing themes within the survey results, it is clear that there existed a general consensus among participants that leadership is important in the field of social work. Many participants discussed the impact of leadership in the field in ways that were consistent with the literature. Such assertions included associations between poor management and burnout rates, lack of organizational goal achievement, and perceived employee value (Mack 2012; Mary 2005). Following these assertions was the emergence of a dichotomy between how participants viewed their own leadership styles and how they viewed the general concept of leadership. When discussing characteristics of their individual leadership styles and how their leadership abilities have been influenced by others, participants remained somewhat consistent with the principles set forth by the literature. However,

when asked about what they have formally learned regarding leadership, participants tended to draw a separation between leaders and followers, as well as connecting leadership to hierarchical structure, title-holding, and natural ability. There were not an overwhelming number who said they truly believed the curriculum was strong in this area. Those who did believe the leadership education was strong did not have specific examples to enforce their belief. Responses related to leadership in curriculum leaned towards ambiguity and did not consistently align with the literature in regards to leadership concepts and practices (Kouzes and Posner 2012; Mary 2005).

Participants implicatively enforced ideas that leadership was better suited for certain personalities, that leadership excludes collaboration, and that leadership is not learned, but an inherent characteristic of some. These implications are contradictory to the viewpoint of Kouzes & Posner (2017) that “leadership is not about personality; it’s about behavior—an observable set of skills and abilities.” It seems that participants have received education in the underlying principles of leadership, but there exists a gap between those principles and the concept of leadership itself.

This study is ongoing. Limitations include a small sample size, which is not at this time generalizable. Also, all data collected was self-reported. Self-reports are subject to inherent biases in each individual. Leadership behavior evaluations from third party observers such as professors and social work field supervisors would provide valuable feedback. Utilizing a tool such as the Leadership Practice Inventory (LPI) in future research will help others understand how their leadership behaviors are perceived by others and any differences between self-reports and observer reports. In the continuation of this research, the investigators plan to collect more surveys, study participant leadership practices through the LPI evaluation, as well as conduct focus groups. Future research should expand the sample to a wider range of CSWE accredited programs and further examine the gap between student self-perceptions and leadership education. Working to explore this issue further and close the gap has great potential to increase

sustainability, job satisfaction, and employee motivation in the field of social work, therefore improving client outcomes and social systems, small and large, in the United States.

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