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Rodrigo Flores, Paula Miranda, Carolina Muñoz and Guillermo Sanhueza

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Rodrigo Flores

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

Paula Miranda

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

Carolina Muñoz

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

Guillermo Sanhueza

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

Abstract

The main goals of this study were to compare levels of job satisfaction (JS) between social workers from private and public organizations. Findings showed significant differences in scores for job satisfaction, psychological states, and role stress between the two groups.

Keywords

Chile, job satisfaction, psychological states, role stress, social workers

Corresponding author:

Rodrigo Flores Guerrero, School of Social Work, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Av Vicuña Mackenna 4860, Macul, Santiago 0123, Chile.

Email: rfloresu@uc.cl

Introduction

Job satisfaction (JS) is related to self-engagement, initiative and meaning in work performance. It is assimilated to different concepts such as centrality of work in human life, role and job involvement. In these concepts the central idea is the link between employees' performance and quality of working life (Summers and Hyman, 2005). This article has special interest in studying the effects of Critical Psychological States (CPS) and Role Stress (RS) on JS among social workers.

Studies developed by Coffey et al. (2004) and Collins (2008) have shown that although social workers have high levels of commitment to their work and are well motivated by contact with service users (Collins, 2008), their JS can become low as a consequence of organizational constraints. As the wide variety of negotiations that social workers have to develop with multiple actors in order to achieve the objectives of their interventions, their levels of JS are permanently jeopardized, turning social workers' JS into an area worthy of further study (Iamamoto, 2004; Molina, 2005). No previous studies in Chile have attempted to explain the degree of JS among social workers, neither to identify variables associated with it, nor to make comparisons among groups of social workers.

It has been estimated that in Chile there are more than 15,000 social workers (Vidal, 2009), with two-thirds of them working in the public sector, and 19 percent of those working in human resource departments in the armed forces. The remaining third is employed by the private sector. These two environments – represented by the raw categories of public and private sector – present different organizational conditions, and our interest is in studying how these differences affect JS (Brewer and Selden, 2000; Kim, 2005).

Perry and Hondeghem (2008: 3) indicated that public services influence JS, based on 'motives associated with serving the public good'; contrary to private sector organizations, which depend on extrinsic rewards to motivate employees in their jobs, public sector organizations are oriented towards the achievement of organizational goals that benefit society and help persons in need, more than financial rewards (Houston, 2000; Wright and Pandey, 2008). According to Perry and Wise (1990) this satisfaction is related to the meaning employees find in their work as well as the sense of responsibility, autonomy, and identity they have on the outcomes in their assigned tasks.

The above findings may find some differences when reviewing Chilean public structures and administration, mainly because in our institutional system, management is based on order, control and procedures, excluding an orientation towards the user, performance evaluation and incentives for

improving and innovating outcomes (Cordero and Muñoz, 2001). Despite the efforts democratic governments have made since 1999 to improve public services, there is still 'dispersion and lack of coordination of effort . . . rigid standardization of social programs, which impedes local flexibility; inadequate supervision and monitoring of programs by new service providers; segmented and highly vertical organization of the Chilean state apparatus' (Raczinski, 2000: 71). Even more, over the last 30 years, Chile has faced multiple changes; among them is the fact that the country has been commonly considered an archetype of neoliberal economics (Marcus, 2004), with an emerging 'paradox of economic growth coupled with persistent inequality that can be traced to social services of variable quality' (Díaz, 2010: 1). This situation is not unconnected to the reduction of the state apparatus and investment in public services, affecting not only the quality of services but also the quality public servants' labor conditions, which could negatively affect their perceptions about work.

Contrary to the experiences of those working in the public sector, Raineri (2001) found that Chilean private sector organizations presented more organic and flexible designs, characterized by having level hierarchies, with higher degrees of professional autonomy, because they needed to respond to complex and globalized environments. These characteristics of Chilean public and private organizations may affect JS among social workers; the question for JS, then, is whether Chilean social workers enjoy more or less JS when they work in public or private organizations.

Literature review

JS has been defined as the relation between an employee and his or her particular job in an organization, when it responds to the individual's overall comparison of actual outcomes with those that are expected (Cranny et al., 1992; Lambert et al., 2006), and its importance in terms of organizational commitment, productivity and creativity, highlighted in a variety of studies such as Best and Thurston (2004), Mahmoud Al-Hussami (2008) and Sofie et al. (2003). It is related to self-engagement, initiative and meaning in work performance. JS in social work settings impacts a better provision of social services (Houston, 2000), increased levels of client satisfaction (Lambert et al., 2006), and improvement in organizational productivity (Glisson and James, 2002). However, there have been up to now no studies about JS among Chilean social workers and the impact of CPS and RS on such outcomes.

Based on Hackman and Oldham's job characteristic model (1976), Humphrey et al. (2007) proposed an extended work design theory, which

recognizes the relevance of the specific motivational characteristics that help to promote meaningfulness at work, understood as 'a particularly encompassing psychological state as it served as a mediator for all five motivational characteristics' (Humphrey et al., 2007: 1334), which are autonomy, skill variety, task identity, task significance and feedback from the job. Two other CPS related to these motivational characteristics and affecting work outcomes are experienced responsibility and knowledge of results. Motivational characteristics and psychological states affect JS; however, according to Behson et al. (2000), there is a need to pay more attention to the study of CPS as these usually are not measured as central mediators of JS.

In regard to RS, it has been defined as lack of clear and defined information to carry out one's own role in the organization (Lambert and Lambert, 2001), and is related to role ambiguity whenever there is not enough information, or there are discrepancies between the available information and the required information to properly carry out the role. Karadal et al. (2008), studying employees from public and private sectors, found that role ambiguity was negatively associated with employees' JS and organizational commitment. Thus, CPS and RS in social workers are concepts to be analyzed in this article.

Social workers and CPS

Most of the research on social workers' JS includes dispositions such as psychological well-being, optimism and reappraisal of coping styles (Hal-Yahia et al., 2000; Kirk and Koeske, 1995; Koeske and Kirk, 1995). Flexibility, autonomy and variability have been identified as dimensions contributing to overall health and well-being in the workplace (Reis et al., 2000). A participatory supervisory style, emotional and instrumental supervisory support (Grasso, 1994) as well as a positive organizational climate and constructive culture (Glisson and James, 2002) have also been linked to overall JS. Additionally, for social workers, skill variety, high task significance, high task identity, low workload, and tougher challenges positively affect their JS (Glisson and Durick, 1988; Jayaratne et al., 1983).

Most of these topics can be grouped within the motivational characteristics related to positive psychological states. Therefore, JS among social workers is related to organizational settings: skill variety and autonomy in the decision-making process, which in turns allows task variety and ensures task identity. All these motivational characteristics require low role ambiguity in order to be achieved. Supervision, understood as feedback, also gives the opportunity for employees to learn about their performance level and proximity to their goal. Both autonomy and feedback

allow change and finding different paths towards goal accomplishment (Humphrey et al., 2007).

One relevant finding is that social workers, when compared with other professionals, do indeed enjoy high JS (Siefert et al., 1991). Social workers are satisfied with their jobs through interaction with people, making a difference to their lives and the community, challenging work and variety of tasks (Leason, 2002). Therefore, one can disregard low JS among social workers caused by their relationships with clients or the type of work they develop, and focus on organizational settings to identify factors affecting JS, such as those identified earlier in this section.

Social workers and Role Stress

RS affects role ambiguity and role conflict and both factors reduce JS. This was corroborated by Harris et al. (2006), who also found that dissatisfaction negatively affects employees' intention to leave. It has been found that negative results related to role conflict are: higher stress levels for individuals, hostile attitudes among organizational members, dissatisfaction, low productivity, difficulty in making decisions and low job performance (Fried et al., 1998; Tubre and Collins, 2000).

Studies have examined the buffering effects of perceived control; employees who perceive themselves as being more in control would experience fewer negative consequences of RS than their counterparts who perceive themselves as being less in control (Terick and LaRocco, 1987). Cole (2004), in a study of RS and JS in social workers in Maryland, found perceived quality of supervision and perceived workload were predictive of JS in a multiple regression analysis. These findings in relation to perceived workload are consistent with those of Jayaratne et al. (1991), Kadushin and Kulysis (1995) and Um and Harrison (1998), who all found higher levels of workload related to less JS among social workers. Several factors can cause ambiguity, including problems arising from the process of determining and defining the role, the limitations coming from the nature of the job and the organization, and management styles and conflicts amongst the roles of the employees (O'Driscoll and Beehr, 2000).

Objectives of the study

The main goals of this study are to describe and compare levels of JS between social workers from a sample of both private and public organizations, also identifying differences (if any) in terms of CPS and RS, two dimensions that have been linked to JS in previous studies.

Study hypotheses

Two hypotheses were developed and tested:

Hypothesis 1: Significant differences regarding overall JS can be found between social workers when comparing those coming from public organizations with those from private organizations.

Hypothesis 2: Significant differences can be found among the two groups in terms of two dimensions that have been linked to JS, such as CPS and RS.

Methodology

Sampling method

Two non-random convenience samples were drawn from a group of social workers who, coincidentally, were participating in continuous educational programs at our own institution in Santiago in 2009. We chose this sampling method because of the unique opportunity we had to access these two samples of practitioners, who represented colleagues from private and public organizations. The first sample was constituted by 96 social workers from for-profit private organizations – called ‘group P’ – whereas the second sample was constituted by 50 social workers from the Chilean National Police, called ‘group C’. Difference in sample sizes was entirely related to original differences in the number of people coming from different organizational settings to participate in such a program.

Besides, we conducted two different mechanisms for collecting data: whereas one self-administered, in-class questionnaire was applied for social workers from the private sector, an online survey was conducted for gathering information on practitioners at the National Police. The reason for this had to do with the type of educational program they had access to: those in the private sector could attend in person and came from the capital city of Santiago, practitioners from the public sector all belonged to the same organization and were working in very distant regions of the country and attended most parts of the program online. Rate responses reached 83.3 percent for those in the public sector and 100 percent for those in private organizations. Informed consent forms were signed among those accepting to participate.

Sample characteristics

Both samples tended to be quite homogeneous in regard to sex and time of permanency in their organizations; more than 96 percent of the participants

Table I. Sample characteristics.

	Group P	%	Group C	%
Sex				
Male	3	3.12	1	2
Female	93	96.87	49	98
Years in company				
≤5	36	37.50	10	20
6–9	15	15.625	18	36
≥10	45	46.875	22	44

in both groups were women. In terms of job stability, both groups had almost 50 percent of respondents with 10 or more years of permanency in the same organization. These similarities in the available information about the samples make their comparison favorable.

Measures

The Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS) (Hackman and Oldham, 1975, 1976, 1980) indicates three psychological states mediating between the characteristics of workers and their reactions to work. The CPS were identified as: i) *experienced meaningfulness of the work*: the degree to which the employee experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable and worthwhile; ii) *experienced responsibility for work outcomes*: the degree to which the employee feels personally responsible and accountable for the results of the work he or she does; and iii) *knowledge of results*: the degree to which the employee knows and understands, on a continuous basis, how effective his or her performance is. Previous studies carried out by Hackman and Oldham (1975, 1976, 1980) demonstrate that the three scales show high correlations and offer high level of reliability.

On the other hand, RS was measured considering: i) role ambiguity (not knowing exactly what behavior(s) is (are) expected in one's job) measured with a four-item scale; ii) role overload (having too much work to do in the available time) measured with a three-item scale; and iii) participation (being consulted about work-related issues) measured through a three-item scale. In order to avoid negative constructs, role ambiguity and role overload were adapted and reversed into the concepts of *role certainty* and *appropriate work overload* in order to make it easier to report results.

The variable JS was measured using the questionnaire of JS S20/23 from Melià and Peiró (1989), which is a 23-item form measuring overall JS including a set of five dimensions. Its validity and reliability has been tested

Table 2. Dependent variable 'overall JS'.

Variables	Social workers in private sector (P)		Social workers in National Police (C)		T-test for independent samples			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	T	sig	Value of the difference	S.E.
Meaningfulness of the work	6.08	0.9	5.59	0.9	3.160	.002	0.50 (**)	0.156
Responsibility for work outcomes	5.38	0.9	5.09	0.8	1.858	.065	0.29	0.156
Knowledge about results	5.55	0.7	4.31	1.2	6.707	.000	1.24 (**)	0.184
Role certainty	5.36	1.3	2.76	1.1	10.56	.000	2.05 (**)	0.193
Appropriate work load	4.3	1.3	3.3	1.3	4.390	.000	1.00 (**)	0.227
Participation	4.64	1.3	2.6	1.1	9.030	.000	2.04 (**)	0.225
Overall JS	5.6	0.7	4.69	0.7	7.739	.000	0.94 (**)	0.120

in several studies (Gonzalez et al., 1990; Melià and Peiró, 1989; Sancerni et al., 1990), showing high levels of internal reliability.

The instruments were designed in Europe and EEUU was the only one of them written originally in the Spanish language. The Spanish translation of the two other instruments is ours. The three instruments' cultural suitability was tested after via Cronbach's alpha tests whose results were acceptable.

Data processing

The statistical package SPSS, version 11.5 was used for analyzing data, and *t*-tests for independent samples were utilized to test both hypotheses. Assumptions regarding normality (due to the large size of both samples [$n_c = 50$, $n_p = 96$]) and independent samples were assumed. *T*-test for independent samples was used to establish whether or not any significant difference could be found among the two groups regarding a set of seven variables.

Main results

As Table 2 shows, in terms of the dependent variable 'overall JS', significant differences were found between both groups: the highest score was

for those working within the private sector, by about one point of difference.

In addition, five of the six independent variables showed significant differences. In all of those, social workers within group P exhibited higher scores than group C. Only *responsibility for work outcomes* had no significant differences, although it could have been significant if a .10 alpha level had been used.

Role certainty differed by more than two points, indicating that this variable exhibits the largest difference between the two groups. A similar magnitude of difference could be found regarding *participation*: again, social workers in private companies also had better scores. Meanwhile, two other variables differed by nearly one point (knowledge of results and appropriate workload). The value of the smaller difference between the groups is found in the variable *significance of the work*, explained in part by a firm dedication to service, common in the professional profile. Major differences between the groups were within the concept 'RS' referring to role certainty, participation and appropriate work load.

Multivariate analysis

The following analysis gives an account of an exercise to explore JS in both groups without expecting definitive answers, but provoking future research. The interest was in finding out what accounted for JS in both groups. To do so, a stable model for both groups was arrived at, where three variants of multiple linear regression analysis were conducted for each group.

To explain JS in social workers from the private sector we used a multiple linear regression model (enter = P-1). The summaries of each model and details of their coefficients are shown in Table 3.

As shown in the above tables, by using the method 'enter', the combination of six independent variables account for about a 53 percentage of the change in the overall JS among social workers within the private sector. The coefficients that were statistically significant in this model were participation, knowledge of results and responsibility for results, drawing attention to the negative sign of the latter. To detect the possible inclusion of relevant variables, a second attempt at modeling was applied, this time using the regression variant 'backward', gaining one percentage point in explaining the dependent variable with respect to the previous model, from 53 to 54 percent.

To explain JS in social workers from the public sector we used a multiple linear regression model (enter = C-1) (see Table 4).

Table 3. First model P-I enter.

Model R		R ²	Corrected R ²	S.E.	Statistical change					
					Change in R ²	Change in F	d.f. 1	d.f. 2	Sig. change F	
P-I	.746(a)	.557	.527	.51209	.557	18,644	6	89	.000	
First model P-I enter										
Model		Non-standardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient	t	Sig.	B to 95%		Statistical collinearity	
		B	S.E.				Beta	Lower limit	Upper limit	Tolerance
P-I	(Constant)	3.09	.543		5.688	.000	2.010	4.169		
	Meaningfulness of the work	.005	.086	.005	.053	.958	-.167	.176	.471	2.125
	Responsibility for work outcomes**	-.199	.080	-.247	-2.497	.014	-.357	-.041	.511	1.959
	Knowledge about results ***	.237	.085	.232	2.791	.006	.068	.406	.723	1.383
	Role ambiguity (role certainty)	.052	.071	.088	.721	.473	-.091	.194	.332	3.012
	Work overload (appropriate work load)	.032	.045	.055	.713	.478	-.058	.123	.821	1.218
	Participation***	.388	.051	.694	7.622	.000	.287	.490	.601	1.663

Table 4. First model C-I enter.

Model	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	Corrected <i>R</i> ²	S.E.	Statistical change					
					Change in <i>R</i> ²	Change in <i>F</i>	d.f.1	d.f. 2	Sig. change <i>F</i>	
C-I	.859(a)	.738	.692	.37082	.738	15,966	6	34	.000	
	Model	Non-standardized coefficient		standardized coefficient	<i>t</i>	Sig.	Confidence intervals 95%		Collinearity	
		B	S.E.	Beta			Limit inferior	Limit superior	Tolerance	FIV
I	(Constant)	.552	.500		1.104	.277	−.464	1.569		
	Experienced meaningfulness of the work **	.318	.066	.454	4.805	.000	.183	.452	.863	1.158
	Responsibility for work outcomes **	.324	.085	.394	3.784	.001	.150	.497	.712	1.405
	Knowledge about results **	.163	.055	.301	2.973	.005	.052	.275	.752	1.330
	Role ambiguity (measured as role certainty)***	.029	.059	.048	.498	.622	−.090	.149	.824	1.214
	Work overload (measured as appropriate work load)***	.008	.046	.016	.173	.864	−.086	.102	.909	1.100
	Index of non-participation***	−.013	.057	−.023	−.237	.814	−.129	.102	.815	1.228

Three independent variables fit the requirement of statistical significance: '*experienced meaningfulness of the work*', '*responsibility for work outcomes*' and '*knowledge about results*'. Examining the beta coefficients, the variable 'Experienced meaningfulness of the work' has the higher value ($\beta = .454$), followed by 'responsibility for work outcomes' ($\beta = .394$), and finally 'knowledge about results' ($\beta = .301$).

Discussion and conclusions

The research compared two groups of social workers from private and public organizations. The results were consistent with international studies about social workers' JS - it tended to be moderate or high in this type of profession (Collins, 2008; Rose, 2003). Notwithstanding this, there was evidence that JS was higher for those professionals working in the private sector than for those who work in the Chilean police. The difference between a medium and high JS for the former and moderate for the latter may have its origins in the characteristics of different organisations.

The results were explained through the differences found at the descriptive level between the two groups regarding the seven variables studied, as described in the previous section. For the overall JS and for five of the other six variables, there were found to be higher scores for social workers within Group P in comparison to those within Group C; with the exception of the variable '*responsibility for work outcomes*'. It can be explained because of the characteristics of public services in Chile, as described by Cordero and Muñoz (2001), our public services' lack of clear definitions about central-state functions, which endure bureaucratic resistance to the decentralization of service delivery, particularly affecting social workers' sense of participation. In spite of this, following Perry and Hondeghem (2008), the interest of serving the public good may still explain public social workers' '*responsibility for work outcomes*'.

The organizational structures of Chilean public services may also explain the biggest difference found in role certainty when compared with those from private organizations. These structures are characterized by high levels of centralization and a lack of conditions to ensure that enough information is disseminated to enable social workers to carry out their roles and tasks. This may produce, as indicated by Lambert and Lambert (2001), discrepancies between the available information and the required information to properly carry out roles, affecting workers' sense of control, which according to Terick and LaRocco (1987), increases JS.

Conversely, private organizations are not structured in a national hierarchy organized according to criteria that establish lines of accountability. This may favor role clarity, flexibility and participation, especially when

considering Raineri's (2001) findings that organic and flexible designs favor level hierarchies in Chilean private organizations.

The results shown by our multivariate analysis pose the question of whether the value assigned by social workers to their helping relationships with clients, as well as their desire to contribute to public good (Houston, 2000), could enhance their job satisfaction based on the *meaningfulness of the work*, the *responsibility for work outcome* and the *knowledge about results*, thus compensating for the effect of role stress and lack of participation on their overall job satisfaction. This tension should enlighten future research

As this study was exploratory and heuristic in nature, there are some limitations that must be mentioned. First, the relatively small and unequal sample sizes versus the high number of variables entered and the non-random procedure employed limited the possibilities for extrapolating conclusions for the entire population of social workers. In addition, the representation of private and public organizations is restricted, as it does not give an account of the whole spectra of private and public organizations.

However, even though definitive conclusions should not be taken from these data, they represent initial understandings and new questions about JS for social workers in Chile and it is expected that this study may facilitate the design of new studies that can address in more depth some of the issues presented here.

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Author biographies

Rodrigo Flores, Paula Miranda, Carolina Muñoz and Guillermo Sanhueza are Professors in the School of Social Work, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.