The Role of Spirituality in Professional Coping among Social Work Students

Yu-Wen Ying
School of Social Welfare
University of California, Berkeley

Presented at
the First North American Conference on Spirituality and Social Work
Renison College, University of Waterloo
Waterloo, Ontario
May 26, 2006

Problem of Job Burnout in Social Workers

*Job Burnout involves the three dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization of clients, and absence of a sense of accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1986).

*It is common among social workers due to consistent and persistent encounters with stressful human conditions.

*Risk is greater among those just entering the profession due to inexperience and limited coping mechanisms.

*Limited research on social work students who spend a significant amount of time at their fieldwork practicum serving clients.

Current Study

Research Question:

Does a spiritual orientation of psychological detachment protect against emotional exhaustion, the most central characteristic of burnout, among masters of social work students (MSWs)?

Significance:

*To ensure students' continued commitment to the profession, excellence in service delivery, and personal well-being;
*To draw implications for social work education to facilitate effective coping and prevent current and future burnout.

Theoretical Framework:

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory of stress and coping suggests that distress arises not primarily from the magnitude of the external stressor but the discrepancy between the perceived demand and ability to cope.

Hypotheses:

The internal resource of psychological detachment and the external resource of social support would reduce emotional exhaustion.

Internal Resource: Psychological Detachment

- Study situated in literature on spirituality as a buffer against distress.

- Psychological detachment is the maintenance of equanimity in stressful situations.

- In the Buddhist tradition, the source of suffering is desire/attachment, and liberation follows acceptance/detachment.

- Neff (2003) has identified psychological detachment as a key component of self-compassion, which she defined as "a useful emotional regulation strategy, in which painful distressing feelings are not avoided but held in awareness with kindness, understanding, and a sense of shared humanity."

- Psychological detachment facilitates acceptance of reality and the interconnectedness between the self and the other.

- During stressful situations, it reduces self-absorption and over-identification, thereby facilitating effective coping.

- Research shows that failure to distance and resist enmeshment with the client increases social worker burnout.

External Resource: Social Support

- Social support facilitates effective coping through information sharing, guidance, and encouragement.

- Research shows social support reduces burnout among social workers.

Methods

<u>Sample</u>

Convenience sample recruited from a study population of 94 second year MSWs.
A total of 28 students participated in the quantitative survey.
A subset of 22 students participated in the qualitative interview.

|  | Survey and Interview (n=22) | Survey Only (n=6) | Total (n=28) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mean Age | 28.1(SD=3.3) | 25.8(SD=3.2) | 27.6(SD=3.4) |
| % Female | 90.9% | 100% | 92.9% |
| % European American | 59.1% | 83.3% | 64.3% |
| % by Specialization |  |  |  |
|   Children and Families | 31.8% | 33.3% | 32.1% |
|   Gerontology | 9.1% | 16.7% | 10.7% |
|   Health | 13.6% | 0% | 10.7% |
|   Mental Health | 31.8% | 16.7% | 32.1% |
|   Management and Planning | 13.6% | 33.3% | 14.3% |
| Weeks in Placement | 20.3(SD=4.0) | 19.3(SD=2.9) | 20.1(SD=3.7) |
| Hours/Week in Placement | 25.1 (SD=3.2) | 24.7(SD=5.9) | 25.0(SD=3.8) |

<u>Measures</u>

<u>Psychological Detachment</u> was measured by the Over-Identification subscale of Neff's (2003) Self-Compassion Scale.

<u>Items</u>:

1.  When I'm feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that is wrong.
2.  When I fail at something important to me I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy.
3.  When something upsets me I get carried away with my feelings.
4.  When something painful happens I tend to blow the incident out of proportion.

<u>Coding</u>: 5-point scale, with 1= almost never and 5=almost always.
Responses were reverse coded with higher scores indicating greater detachment.

<u>Sample Mean: 2.58 (SD=.87</u>) with a possible range of scores of 1 to 5.

<u>Internal Alpha Reliability</u>: .71

<u>Predictive Validity</u> was supported by the scores' positive association with self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979; r=.62, p<.001) and physical wellness (Adams, Bezner, & Steinhardt, 1997; p=.42, p=.02), but negative association with anxiety (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1970; r=

-.70, p<.001), and depressive trait (Jay & John, 2004; r= -.71, p<.001) and state (Radloff, 1977; r= -.51, p=.005).

Social Support was measured by the Social Wellness Subscale of the Perceived Wellness Survey (Adams, et al., 1997).

Items:

1. Members of my family come to me for support.
2. Sometimes I wonder if my family will really be there for me when I am in need (reverse coded).
3. My friends know they can always confide in me and ask me for advice.
4. My family has been available to support me in the past.
5. In the past, I have not always had friends with whom I could share my joys and sorrows (reverse coded).
6. My friends will be there for me when I need help.

Coding: 5-point scale, with 1= strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree.

Sample Mean: 4.17 (SD=.68) with possible range of scores of 1 to 5.

Internal Alpha Reliability: .79

Convergent Validity was supported by the scores' positive association with number of people in their support network (r=.61, p=.001) and satisfaction with social support (r=.58, p=.001), as measured by Sarason's (1997) social support questionnaire.

Emotional Exhaustion was measured by the Emotional Exhaustion subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1986).

Items:

1. I feel emotionally drained from my field placement.
2. I feel used up at the end of the workday.
3. I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day at the field placement.
4. Working with people all day is really a drain for me.
5. I feel frustrated by my field placement.
6. Working with people directly puts too much stress on me.
7. I feel like I'm at the end of my rope.

Coding: 5-point scale, with 1=strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree.

Sample Mean: 18.75 (SD=5. 28) on a possible range of 7 to 35

Internal Alpha Reliability: .84

Convergent Validity was supported by a significant negative association with a sense of professional accomplishment (r= -.51, p=.006).

Demographics information, such as age, gender, race, specialization, number of weeks worked in the placements and hours per week worked, was collected to describe the sample.

Interview consisted of open-ended questions assessing coping with stressful challenges at their field placement.

These included:

1. Tell me about the most difficult challenge you faced at your first or second year placement. What happened?

2. What was the most upsetting aspect of it?

3. How did you cope with it?

4. What internal resources did you use to cope with this challenge?

5. What external resources did you use to cope with this challenge?

6. What was the outcome of your coping response?

7. Were you satisfied with the outcome?

Procedure

All second year MSW students were invited to participate via mass email and an invitation letter placed in their mailboxes.

Interest students signed consent forms for participation and completed the survey at a time and place of their choosing.

Upon completion of the survey, 22/28 participants in the survey agreed to be interviewed by a research assistant.

Participants were paid $10 for the survey and $10 for the interview.

Table 2. Multiple Regression Results of the Effect of Psychological Detachment and Social Support on Emotional Exhaustion

Adjusted R-Squared = .30
$F_{(2, 25)} = 6.7$, p=.005

| | Emotional Exhaustion |
| --- | --- |
| Psychological Detachment | -.47 (p=.004)* |
| Social Support | -.29 (p=.04)* |

*Standardized beta with one-tailed tests.

Presence of significant relationships in light of the small sample size shows the strength of the associations.


Qualitative Results

Selection of Illustrative Interviews

16/22 (72.7%) of most difficult challenge pertained to a clinical difficulty;
11/22 (50%) addressed such a difficulty in an ongoing treatment relationship.

These served as focus of current study.

Of these 11 interviews, the participants with the lowest and highest scores on personal detachment were selected.

Interview Illustrating Low Psychological Detachment and High Emotional Exhaustion

A health student placed in a medical setting had the lowest psychological detachment score (1.25/5), the highest emotional exhaustion score (34/35), and a moderate level of social support (2.67/5) on the survey.

Most difficult challenge: "It's my ability to feel confident as a social worker."

Most upsetting aspect: "I'd go visit (this patient) and we would have a conversation that didn't meet my expectations. She never opened up and I would feel disappointed because I couldn't get her to talk about things I thought she needed to talk about and others thought she needed to talk about. I had a lot of disappointment and felt like a failure as a social work student."

Internal resources: Unable to respond initially, and eventually stated, "I think I probably tried positive self talk or something like that, but I am just drawing a blank."

External resources: "Talking."

Outcome of coping: "Talking to people led me to certain insights, but it was a long process between talking, and thinking, and getting to the insight."

Satisfaction with outcome: "I wish I had coped a bit more effectively because it was a big challenge in my internship and I feel like I dreaded my internship so much because of it. It made unhappy the whole first semester…I wish I had more internal resources to cope with it and realize that it was a process everyone goes through."

Interview Illustrating High Psychological Detachment and Low Emotional Exhaustion

A mental health student working with incarcerated youth had the highest score on psychological detachment (3.25/5), the lowest score on emotional exhaustion (15/35), and a high level of social support (4.67/5) on the survey.

Most difficult challenge: "A client who is literally and figuratively crying out for help and not really getting (it)."

Most upsetting aspect: "I won't be able to do anything about it and maybe he will end up in prison when he is 30. There is the potential for a very bad ending."

Internal resources: "Before I sought therapy, I was crying about it when I went to sleep at night. So I did a lot of my own cognitive stuff. So I figured out that he does remind me of my brother...Part of my coping has been my own spirituality and my belief that we all have our own pathway. And, I do believe that whatever happens is supposed to happen, that we come in and out of other people's worlds for a short time for a reason, and that is how it is supposed to be."

External resources: "Talking to my husband and supervisor a lot. Consulting with other staff."

Outcome of the coping: "I think I was feeling better before I realized that he was doing better, so I think the outcome is pretty good."

Satisfaction with the outcome: "Sort of. I mean I think that what I've come to realize (is that) it is part of a process, a part of an internship. I've never done therapy, never worked in the county before. I'm starting to feel comfortable that I'm in the midst of a process – learning emotionally and professionally how to deal with these things. I'm satisfied with the fact that I'm on my way to being satisfied. I don't feel I'm done but I'm satisfied with where I'm going."

Discussion

As predicted, psychological detachment and social support significantly protected against emotional exhaustion in social work students. The presence of psychological detachment is an important internal resource that protects against feeling emotionally overwhelmed by a stressor, resulting in a diminished capacity to cope. This was illustrated in the interview excerpts.

In the first interview, the student's had difficulty identifying an internal resource. The challenge of inexperience resulted in her negative self-judgment as a failure and negatively colored her entire internship experience.

In the second interview, the student also acknowledged her limited skills. In spite of her emotional reaction, she was able to reflect on her reaction (evidencing detachment) and sought psychological assistance to cope. Furthermore, her psychological detachment enhanced acceptance of the process of her professional development.

As expected, social support was found to protect against emotional exhaustion in both the quantitative survey and the qualitative interview results. The interviewee with greater support reported less exhaustion than the one with less support. However, although social support has long been known to protect against distress, psychological detachment emerged as a more important predictor in our study, suggesting the potential utility of fostering its development in social work students.

Implications for Social Work Education

The practice of mindfulness has been found to promote awareness, detachment, and acceptance, and may be a useful practice to incorporate into social work education to enhance student coping. Its effectiveness should be evaluated in future research.

Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

1. Small sample size. Not possible to assess more complex models. Larger samples in future studies are needed to enhance our understanding of how spirituality protects against distress and enhances well-being in social work students.

2. Use of a cross-sectional design. This precludes any definitive conclusions regarding cause and effect. Future research should utilize a longitudinal design, ideally beginning at the time when students enter the program and following up before graduation.

3. Recruitment of sample from one MSW program. As such, the results may have limited external validity. Future research should include samples from multiple sites to better reflect the population of social worker students.

In spite of these limitations, the study makes a contribution to the literature on spirituality and social work by focusing on a previously understudied population and using a mixed methods design to demonstrate the important function of psychological detachment in protecting against emotional exhaustion in social work students.

References

Adams, K. B., Matto, H. C., & Harrington, D. (2001). The Traumatic Stress Institute Belief Scale as a measure of vicarious trauma in a national sample of clinical social workers. Families in Society, 82(4), 363-371.

Jay, M., & John, O. P. (2004). A depressive symptom scale for the California Psychological Inventory: Current validation of the CPI-D. Psychological Assessment, 16(3), 299-309.

Lazarus, R., & Folkman, S. (1984). Stress, appraisal and coping. New York: Springer.

Maslach, C., & Jackson, S. E. (1986). Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual (2nd Edition). Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.

Neff, K. D. (2003). The development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. Self and Identity, 2, 223-250.

Radloff, L. S. (1977). The CES-D Scale: A self-report depression scale for research in the general population. Applied Psychological Measurement, 1, 385-401.

Rosenberg, M. (1979). Conceiving the self. New York: Basic Books.

Sarason, B. R., Sarason, I. G., & Gurung, R. A. (1997). Close personal relationships and health outcomes: A key to the role of social support. In S. Duck (Ed.), Handbook of social relationships: Theory, research and interventions (pp.548-573). New York; John Wiley & Sons.

Spielberger, C., Gorsuch, R. L., & Lushene, R. E. (1970). Manual for the State Trait Anxiety Inventory. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologist Press.