Finding Joy in Social Work


There is much data about the problems that social workers face but little about their positive experiences (Bride, 2007).

Literature provides evidence that there are factors that promote job satisfaction: workload, challenge, role ambiguity and conflict, colleague relationships, financial reward (Collins, 2008; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Poulin, 1995).

The lack of attention to positive experiences is especially noteworthy considering the recent emphasis on the strengths perspective (Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014a; Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014b).
A positive perspective allows for development of more complete understanding of social work employees

Two emerging perspectives

- Positive psychology: concerned with experiences of well-being and happiness at every level of society (Frederickson, 2001)
- Appreciative inquiry: the study and exploration of what gives life to human systems when they function at their best (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p.1)

(Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014a; Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014b)
Methods

- Used snowball sample to recruit social workers in Columbia, SC, Texas, and North Carolina

- The final sample included 26 participants:
  - 23 females and 3 males
  - 19 Whites and 7 people of color
  - age range 23-73
  - 2 BSWs and 24 MSWs
  - Experience ranging 2-50 years in diverse social work fields

- Interviewed participants using questions designed to promote and elicit reactions about joy in social work

(Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014a; Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014b)
Findings: Four clusters

• *Interpersonal*: result from interactions between social workers and other people
  – making connections
  – making a difference

• *Intrapersonal*: internal to social worker
  – Making meaning
  – Making a life

(Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014a; Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014b)
Findings: Four clusters

- **Interpersonal**: result from interactions between social workers and other people
  - making connections
    - Emphasis on process and quality of emotional engagement rather than outcomes from relationships with clients, colleagues, students—intensity and depth of connection and engagement
  - making a difference
    - Focus on outcomes
    - Encompasses change from individual to larger levels

(Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014a)
Findings: Four clusters

- Intrapersonal: internal to social worker
  - Making meaning
    - Related to reflective and interpretative processes regarding the significance of their work
    - Consciously finding significance in positive effects from their actions
  - Making a life
    - Finding joy through attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that they used as guides in practice and in other facets of life

(Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014b)
Findings: Making Connections

• Connecting with clients: authentic, deep emotional engagement with a client
  – Nearly ¾ participants mentioned client relationships as source of joy

• Being present: accompanying a person in distress
  – Emphasis on being with the client rather than doing for the client
  – Can’t fix all problems but can help emotionally

(Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014a)
Findings: Making Connections (cont.)

• Being heard: client understands and acknowledges the social worker’s perspective
  – Perception of client responsiveness

• Finding positive colleagues: seeking colleagues with shared values and mission
  – Sought out and built relationships with colleagues that shared positive outlook

(Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014a)
Findings: Making a Difference

• Making a difference with clients
  – Facilitating client change: contributing to change and growth
  – Seeing fruits of labor: observing results of effort over time, long term positive outcomes
  – Facilitating client belonging: helping a client to be included, accepted, and cared for as a member of a social group
  – Receiving gratitude: having work appreciated and acknowledged by a recipient
  – Relieving client distress: intervening to reduce emotional pain/trauma

(Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014a)
Findings: Making a Difference (cont.)

• Positively affecting colleagues: coworkers, supervisees, social work interns
  – Receiving appreciation: having self/contribution affirmed by colleagues
  – Facilitating supervisee growth: actively contributing to professional development of supervisees, including social work interns

(Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014a)
Findings: Making a Difference (cont.)

- Effecting macro level change: systemic differences
  - Facilitating system change: knowing that one’s intervention contributed to system growth and change
  - Influencing programmatic decisions: exerting leadership at the programmatic level to make a difference

- Innovating: creative problem solving on the job
  - Key: exercise of personal agency for creative problem solving, highlight on process

(Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014a)
Findings: Making Meaning

• Finding fit in work: making sure that the job and the field of practice are best suited to interests and needs

• Serving others: finding pleasure and satisfactions in helping others
  – Joy found in helping process in addition to outcomes
  – Meaning drawn from process of engagement

(Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014b)
Findings: Making Meaning (cont.)

• Finding meaning in social work: recognizing the significance and value of professional social work

• Finding purpose: deep sense of personal fulfillment
  – Not only intrinsically meaningful work, but also connects to personal reason for existence

(Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014b)
Findings: Making a Life

• Outlook
  – Gaining perspective: recognizing what’s important and abandoning illusions
  – Managing expectations: being realistic in terms of what you can expect of yourself
    • Not being dependent on outcomes
  – Rejoicing in little things: finding satisfaction and joy in little things over time

(Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014b)
• Growing at work
  – Learning continually: always learning new things, expanding your understanding and skills, and learning by doing
    • Never stop learning
  – Gaining confidence: an increased sense of self-confidence over time
    • Grow more comfortable
  – Maturing: personal and professional growth through experience and over time

(Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014b)
Social workers find joy in work: happens through making connections, making a difference, making meaning, and making a life

We can experience joy through making meaning when we think in purposeful ways that enhance investment

Finding meaning in connections provides motivation

Deep engagement and meaning making may be keys to a gratifying social work career

When social workers believe that “this is what I’m here to do”, they may have increased resilience

(Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014a; Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014b)
• Making meaning may help social workers stay positive, focused, and persistent in the face of difficulties

• Strong sense of purpose can make social workers eager to expand knowledge base and skill set
  – Continuing education can be transformed from something to endure to a source of joy

• Self-care can help social workers increase their joy

• What if we could make joy part of a social worker’s skill set?

(Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014a; Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014b)
Intentionality increases joy (Kelm, 2008):
- identify something to do in the morning before work
- reflect on experience at the end of the work day

Share joy with colleagues—positive spiral of joy

Finding joy is an active process—it is our job to seek out joy

Work on the “social” part of social work

Use evidence-based practice and assess—knowing we have made a difference increases potential for joy

(Pooler, Wolfer, & Freeman, 2014a)
References


Prepared by H Goldstein (2014)