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Gender, Race, Job Satisfaction and the Social Services

Nalini Negi, PhD

There has been a paucity of studies examining the job satisfaction of social service employees, despite the fact that social service employees are often exposed to less than optimum antecedents for job satisfaction. Social service employees often work under stressful and physically dangerous conditions with relatively small financial return. It is not unreasonable to assume that the alarmingly high attrition rates are a direct consequence of low levels of work satisfaction and low pay. The research that has been conducted in this area indicates that job satisfaction is an important factor in determining employee turn-over (Cranny, Smith, & Stone, 1992; Tett, 1993). Consequently, an understanding of job satisfaction among social service providers is not only relevant, but also crucial so that social service employees can be equipped with the appropriate support needed to overcome the often difficult work conditions associated with the field.

Some research has been conducted on the relationship between job satisfaction in social services and the negative effects of stress (Coffey, Dugdill, & Tattersall, 2004). However, there is scant research on the relationship between gender and job satisfaction in the social service field. This gap in research is noteworthy because social service employees are disproportionately female. A 2001 survey by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) reports that 80% of NASW members are female and 20% are male. Even more alarming is that there is very little research regarding the interplay of race and gender in the job satisfaction of social service employees, given the high value placed on multicultural understanding within social service agencies.

Job Satisfaction

The study of job satisfaction has been a great source of interest in the past 20 years in the organizational sciences. In fact, the topic of job

satisfaction has received more attention from researchers in the organizational sciences than any other single topic (Cranny et al., 1992). The vast literature on job satisfaction, however, does not offer a consistent definition of this concept nor a consistent theory regarding the antecedents to job satisfaction. Regardless, researchers agree that the understanding of job satisfaction is crucial.

Variations in the definition of job satisfaction are prevalent in research literature. Generally, job satisfaction is described as a widely used summary measure of workers' attitudes of overall acceptance, contentment, and enjoyment in their jobs (Hodson, 2004). The antecedents of job satisfaction offered by existing literature are similarly inconsistent (Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998; Lok & Crawford, 2001; Morris & Villemez, 1992; Repetti and Cosmas, 1991). Some studies underscore the importance of employee expectations of professional mobility, actual promotion opportunities, and positive features of the job in shaping job satisfaction (Morris & Villemez, 1992). Others posit the importance of the social environment of the work place as a better predictor of job satisfaction. Lok & Crawford (2001) theorize that job satisfaction is related to the employees' perception of organizational culture and subculture. Judge et al., (1998) offer another view -- that job satisfaction is related to the individual worker's perception of her/himself whereby individuals with more positive self-concepts are more satisfied.

Whatever the definition used, researchers generally agree that promoting job satisfaction is a vital task of management as it creates confidence, loyalty, and work quality (Tietjen & Myers, 1998). In addition, job satisfaction has a positive effect on commitment levels (Donovan, Brown, & Mowen, 2004). In contrast, there are higher levels of attrition in a work place where employees are dissatisfied (Goetze & . 2001; Victoriano, 2001). There is also more stress (Parry-Jones et

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al., 1998), and even health problems (Brockmann, 2002).

Job Satisfaction and Gender

How job satisfaction relates to gender has become a pertinent issue since the incorporation of women into the workforce (Sohoni, 1993). Variations in job satisfaction are well-documented in the work experiences of men and women (Mason, 1995). Women report less *satisfaction* and pride in their work than men (Hodson, 2002). Literature suggests the role of the “glass ceiling” as well as “social issues” contribute to this difference in satisfaction between men and women.

Glass ceiling. The “glass ceiling” is defined as barriers to the employment advancement of women and minorities. It is experienced in lower pay and lower rates of promotions, among other factors (Wrigley, 2002). Studies indicate that low pay is related to lowered rates of job satisfaction (Phillips-Miller, Campbell, & Morrison, 2000; Richardsen & Burke, 1993). Women continue to earn less than their male colleagues (Karlin, England, & Richardson, 2002) even when women are as highly educated as the men (Brynin, 2002). In fact, men earn higher salaries than women even in jobs that are typed as feminine (Goldberg, Finkelstein, Perry, & Konrad, 2004). This gender-wage gap in the American workforce is amongst the highest in industrialized nations (Blau & Kahn, 2000).

Social Issues. Other research studies indicate that social issues are more important than income in women’s job satisfaction (Tang, Singer, & Roberts, 2000). Perhaps some of these social issues can be understood through gender roles that are proscribed for both men and women. According to Thompson and Walker (1989), men are still viewed as the primary “bread winners” or the family providers while women are still expected to put family needs first. Feminist gender theory asserts that these gender roles or stereotypes are part of gendered structures wherein some men are upholders of power and privilege over all women and also over marginalized men (Foster, 1999). Gender stereotypes generally assume that men’s characteristics are more valuable than women’s;

hence men are viewed as more competent (Ridgeway, 1997) or valuable. Feminization then has a direct effect upon the experiences of the individual—be it in the realm of family or employment (Thompson & Walker, 1989). Women’s lack of prominence or lack of credibility fueled by the notion of gender roles may negatively impact their levels of job satisfaction as compared to their male counterparts.

Job Satisfaction and Race

Research literature indicates that job satisfaction is influenced by the race of the employee (Sinacore-Guinn, 1998). Racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to be targets of discrimination as compared to their Anglo American counterparts. Among minorities, job satisfaction has been shown to be related to *race*-related stressors as well as routine work stressors (Holder & Vaux, Dec 1998). For example, in African Americans the likelihood of hypertension is significantly increased with higher levels of perceived stress following racist incidents at work (Din-Dzietham, Nembhard, Collins, & Davis, 2004). Job dissatisfaction affects Latinos as well, and they generally report lower rates of job satisfaction than Whites (Chusmir & Koberg, 1990). *Job satisfaction* is, then, shown to be associated with perceived discrimination because of *race* (Valentine, Silver, & Twigg, 1999).

Job Satisfaction, Gender, and Race

Gender, race, and job satisfaction are interrelated (Porter, 2003). These inter-relationships are best understood through the overarching structures of inequity in gender and race relations. Inequality is played out in gender relations as well as in race and class relations. In fact, it has been theorized that gender and race are embedded processes that are deeply related to one another (Anderson, 1996). Gender is then permeable to macro-level racial inequality (Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 1999). In order to understand any form of inequality requires an analysis of its multiple facets (Hogan, 2001).

Minority men and women tend to have more disparate work experiences compared to their Anglo American counterparts. Minorities are of-

ten passed over for promotions, due largely to racial and gender bias (Maume, 1999). Among all ethnic/racial minority groups, African American women have one of the lowest rates of promotion to leadership positions (Porter, 2003). This glass ceiling also negatively impacts job satisfaction in Latinos and has a substantial impact on turnover intentions (Foley, Kidder, & Powell, 2002). Even when minority women break through the glass ceiling, their levels of job satisfaction are lower than their Anglo American counterparts. For example, African American women physicians report being less satisfied with their careers than Anglo women physicians (Corbie-Smith, Frank, & Nickens, 2000). In sharp contrast, research indicates the presence of a "glass escalator" for White men, which underscores the significance of race and gender on employment and satisfaction (Maume, 1999).

Job Satisfaction and Social Services

Social services is a particularly relevant field for studying job satisfaction due to its propensity for low antecedents to job satisfaction. Social service employees generally receive low financial compensation. According to a 2003 NASW survey, a majority of social workers have an annual income of less than \$30,000. Their day-to-day work is often subject to high levels of stress (Coffey et al., 2004). Rising violence in social services also contributes to feelings of lack of control or powerlessness (Brockmann, 2002). Social service employees have also reported feeling unable to control or shape factors that are causing stress (Parry-Jones et al., 1998). The impact of stress on social workers can be evidenced by high sickness absence in social services (Horder, 1999). Consequently, social service staffs – particularly those working with children – have the highest rates of absenteeism and reports of low levels of well-being (Coffey et al., 2004). These difficult conditions in social service work (illustrated by low pay, high levels of stress, and feelings of powerlessness) can create less than optimum work conditions and thereby lower levels of job satisfaction.

Social Services, Gender, and Race

The examination of job satisfaction among men and women of different ethnic backgrounds in social services is particularly vital since the field operates upon a value system that supports cultural/ethnic diversity and condemns discrimination. The dynamics of gender and race and their interplay on work satisfaction among social service employees then calls for an assessment of the incorporation of this egalitarian value system within the social service sector. Literature regarding social service employees indicates that minorities, particularly women, are more prone to lower levels of antecedents of job satisfaction than men. Although women are approximately 80% of social work practitioners, they continue to be under-represented in administrative and management roles. This is true even though women are the vast majority of those with graduate social work degrees (Thompson & Marley, 1999). Men in social services are disproportionately found in management roles (McLean, 2003), reflecting a system of patriarchy within social welfare (Dressel, 1987). Consequentially, it may be inferred that the levels of job satisfaction for women and men in social services will be different from one another as they are shaped by their gendered experiences. However, little can be said about the interplay of race and gender in the experiences of social service employees since studies on this topic are lacking.

Social Services: Working in Resource Poor Environments

Social services nationwide have seen dramatic shifts in the public social service sector due to budget cuts in social services and the dynamic and rapidly changing population. These budget cuts have further exacerbated the often difficult work conditions of social service employees through increased client case loads, over-extension of duties or work requirements, and employee cuts. These budget reductions in the public social service sector have occurred at a time when the national demography is rapidly changing in a way that provides unique challenges to address ongoing need. Budget cuts coupled with ever rising need has

affected social service providers through increases in caseloads, responsibilities, and “doing with less.” Although, little is known about the job satisfaction of social service providers, high attrition rates underscore the value of understanding job satisfaction, particularly at this relevant time. Attrition rates among social service employees are 25% for protective service workers, 24% for caseworkers, and 15% for clinical social workers (The Annual Report on Full Time Classified State Employee Turnover for the Fiscal Year 2002). These high attrition rates are especially alarming when we consider the ever increasing demand for services, and continued projected demand for social services in the future. The impact of these changes in the social service sector can have a significant impact on the levels of satisfaction of social service employees. The study of job satisfaction is, then, vital to ensure a productive and vital staff that is strongly equipped to handle these emerging challenges.

The purpose of this study is to determine if job satisfaction in the social services is influenced by gender and/or race. This study utilizes the Survey of Organizational Excellence (SOE) (Lauderdale, 1999) to assess the relationship between gender and job satisfaction in State social service employees in Texas. The SOE’s assesses job satisfaction based upon four attributes: “opportunity,” “resources,” “work and personal life balance,” and “pace of work.” This study examines the level of job satisfaction of female employees, in particular those of ethnic and racial minority backgrounds, in comparison to the level of satisfaction of male social service employees. This study posits three hypotheses based on the literature review: 1) We believe female employees will have significantly lower levels of job satisfaction on at least one of the attributes of job satisfaction when compared to male employees. 2) Minority female employees will have lower levels of job satisfaction on at least one attribute of job satisfaction than Anglo-American/White employees. 3) Minority female employees will have lower levels of satisfaction than minority men in at least one attribute of job satisfaction.

Method

Measures

The Survey of Organizational Excellence (SOE) (Lauderdale, 1999). The SOE was utilized to measure job satisfaction in this study. The SOE provides the means to collect internal data, which includes employee attitudes, beliefs, and values. More than 20 pretests have been performed on the survey instrument to ensure readability and the reliability of scales and items. Pretest data indicate that SOE provides reliable measures (Cronbach alpha of .85 or greater) for the scales of employee attitudes and employee information. The SOE demonstrated high criterion validity, which was determined through comparisons to other related instruments such as the *Five Systems*, *The Alienation Scale*, and *The Burnout Inventory* (Lauderdale, 1999). The SOE is a widely used survey. More than 200,000 of these surveys have been distributed in over 75 different public and private organizations not only in Texas, but also Missouri and Florida, to name a few. It has also received bi-partisan political support from four Texas governors.

The SOE assesses five dimensions: work team, physical work settings accommodations, general organizational features, communication patterns, and personal demands. The SOE breaks down each of these dimension into constructs. The work-team dimension contains the construct of job satisfaction. For purposes of this study, the job satisfaction construct was utilized. The job satisfaction construct explores the degree to which employees like their jobs and their work environment by focusing on both the job itself and the availability of resources to do their job (Lauderdale, 1999). This construct consists of four attributes: opportunity, resources, work and personal life balance, and pace of work. Participants reported the frequency of their feelings on each of the latter attributes of job satisfaction from “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “feel neutral,” “agree,” “strongly agree,” and “don’t know/not applicable.”

Procedures. The participants of this study are State Social Service employees in Texas, which includes the Texas Department of Health and

Protective Services, Protective and Regulatory Services, Human Services, Mental Health and Retardation, and Early Childhood Interventions. The survey data for this research were collected in 2003-2004, and the data collection process involved several steps. Prior to the distribution of the survey, the leadership of each of the Departments introduced the survey to all its employees. The distribution of the survey included the following: a cover letter introducing the survey, detailed instructions on how to take the survey, a scannable questionnaire and return envelope, and a listing of organization codes. Participants were reminded by the leadership of each organization to take the survey one week before the survey was due. The surveys were coded individually with a unique number. Participants were also given the option to take the survey on the web. A similar protocol was followed for those who took the survey on the web. Web participants received an introductory letter and detailed instructions. A reminder to take the survey was sent to web respondents one week prior to the due date of survey submissions. If an identical survey (identical unique identity number) was received by mail and the internet, the internet survey was discarded. Most respondents completed the survey in 30 minutes or less.

Participants. This study involved 26,301 participants of which we received 16,818 valid survey questionnaires. All participants are social service employees involved in direct social service delivery. Female participants represent 75.8% of the participants ($N=12,872$) and males represented 23% ($N=3,946$). The differences in total percentages from 100% are due to individuals that did not report on the various demographic characteristics. The ethnic/racial demographic breakdown is as follows: 17% African American, 29% Hispanic/Mexican American, 50% Anglo American/White, 2% Asian American/Pacific Islander/Native American, and 2% Multi-racial or Other.

Results

Four independent t tests were conducted to evaluate the hypothesis that there are gender and racial differences in job satisfaction. The first t

test examined the gender and job satisfaction attribute of “work and personal life balance.” The results for this test indicate that the mean scores for women ($M = 3.22, SD = 1.13$) was significantly lower than men ($M = 3.26, SD = 1.11$), $t(6504.179) = -2.21, p = .05$. The results further show that for the job satisfaction attribute of “pace of work,” women ($M = 2.92, SD = 1.11$) had significantly lower scores than men ($M = 3.16, SD = 1.15$), $t(16607) = -11.320, p = .05$. These results support our hypothesis that women report lower levels of on the job satisfaction attributes of “work and personal life balance,” “pace of work.” However, no significant differences were detected between women’s level of job satisfaction with “opportunity” ($M = 3.34, SD = 1.16$), and men scores ($M = 3.38, SD = 1.17$). In addition, there was no significant difference between women’s level of job satisfaction with “resources” ($M = 3.19, SD = 1.10$), and the mean for men ($M = 3.21, SD = 1.11$).

The second independent t test looked at job satisfaction between minority females and Anglo-American/White women. The results indicate that minority women had higher “opportunity” attributes ($M = 3.44, SD = 1.15$) than Anglo-American/White women ($M = 3.27, SD = 1.16$), $t(16328) = 9.51, p = .01$. Furthermore, minority women ($M = 3.32, SD = 1.84$) had significantly higher “adequate resources” attributes when compared to Anglo-American/White women ($M = 3.08, SD = 1.10$), $t(16462) = 14.22, p = .01$. Similarly, for the job satisfaction attribute of “pace of work” the mean difference for minority women ($M = 3.04, SD = 1.18$) is significantly greater than Anglo-American/White women ($M = 2.90, SD = 1.16$), $t(16425) = 7.646, p = .01$. However, on the job satisfaction attribute of “balance between work and personal life” there are no significant differences for minority women ($M = 3.22, SD = 1.13$) and Anglo-American/White women ($M = 3.23, SD = 1.12$). These results are contrary to our hypothesis that minority women will have lower levels of satisfaction on at least one attribute of job satisfaction than Anglo-American/White women.

The third t test was conducted to determine if ethnic minority male and minority female job

satisfaction attitudes differ from each other. On the job satisfaction attribute of “opportunity” the mean difference for minority women ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.15$) is significantly greater than the mean of minority men ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.18$), $t(10486) = 2.316$, $p = .02$. Similarly, on the attribute of “pace of work,” minority women ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.17$) scores are significantly less than minority men ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.15$), $t(10546) = -7.053$, $p = .01$. However, for the attribute of “adequate resources” minority women scores ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.08$) are higher than minority men ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.121$), $t(9107.048) = 4.299$, $p = .01$. There is no significant differences in the job satisfaction attribute of “work and personal life balance” between minority women ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.13$) and minority men ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.12$). This supports our hypothesis that minority women will have lowered levels of satisfaction than minority men on at least one attribute of job satisfaction.

Discussion

In initiating this study we posited three hypotheses: 1) Women will have significantly lower levels of job satisfaction on at least one of the attributes of job satisfaction when compared to men. 2) Minority women will have lower levels of job satisfaction on at least one attribute of job satisfaction when compared to Anglo-American/White women. 3) Minority women will have lower levels of job satisfaction than minority men on at least one attribute of job satisfaction. A comparison of the levels of job satisfaction between female and male employees supports some of the various hypotheses we proposed. Women are less satisfied than men with their work and personal life balance, as well as the pace of their work. The gender disparity in satisfaction with work and personal life balance is consistent with social science research, which attributes this inconsistency to the insidious nature of gender roles (Marsden & Kalleberg, 1993; Mason, 1995; Wrigley, 2002). Gender roles prescribe a stronger emphasis on the family for women than for men (Thompson & Walker, 1989). As antiquated as these gender roles may seem, they have proven to be resilient despite the advancement of women (Hughes & Seta, 2003). Women, therefore, may

feel greater societal pressures to nurture and to spend more time with their family than men. This continues to press the need in female employees to seek for workplaces or jobs that do not impinge upon their personal obligations to family. Women’s greater dissatisfaction with the pace of the work environment than men may be related to subscribed gender roles and the recent increases in social service workload. Recent budget cuts have prompted the increase of work load for many social service employees. This increase in work commitment may be especially difficult for women to meet because women are often expected to do the majority of household tasks (Broman, Mavaddat, & Hsu, 2001).

Further analysis revealed that female and male employees are not significantly different in their reports of satisfaction with their work’s provision of opportunities and resources to do their best job. This finding is in direct contrast to organizational research that indicates that female employees are often subject to a “glass ceiling,” which limits their opportunities and resources to succeed in the work place (Wrigley, 2002). This lack of difference in satisfaction between men and women is surprising but may be attributed to lower job satisfaction expectations among women (Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza, 2003). Gendered socialization may account for the difference between how men and women judge the resources available to them (Ridgeway, 1997).

Job Satisfaction among Minority and Anglo-American/White Female Employees

We failed to find support for our hypothesis that minority women will have lower levels of job satisfaction on at least one attribute of job satisfaction when compared to Anglo-American/White women. In fact, analysis exposed exactly the contrary: minority women had higher levels of satisfaction on the attributes of “opportunity,” “resources,” and “pace of work.” The bulk of research on race and job satisfaction indicates that minority status has a significantly negative effect on job satisfaction (Chusmir & Koberg, 1990; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993). Furthermore, organizational research consistently indicates that minority women in particular have the lowest ante-

cedents to job satisfaction compared to any other group (Coffey et al., 2004). One explanation for this discrepancy could be that minority racial/ethnic status along with minority gender status (female) renders individuals vulnerable to double discrimination: once for being female and once for being of a member of an ethnic/racial minority group (Cotter et al., 1999). As a result of this pattern of discrimination, minority women may have even lower job satisfaction expectations than their Anglo-American/White female colleagues, who may experience gender bias without the exacerbating effect of racial discrimination.

Although, there was no main effect between the satisfaction of minority women and Anglo-American/White women in regards to work and personal life balance, the test of our first hypothesis revealed that women in general reported lower levels of satisfaction with work and personal life balance than men. We can then assume that both minority and Anglo-American/White women are equally satisfied/dissatisfied by their work and personal life balance.

Job Satisfaction among Minority Female and Male Employees

Our comparative analysis of job satisfaction levels between female and male employees shows that minority women are less satisfied than men on the attributes of “opportunity” and “pace of work.” Further, minority female employees have higher levels of job satisfaction than Anglo-American/White female employees but lower satisfaction than minority men. These results could be indicative of the theory of hegemonic masculinity, which asserts that all men hold power over all women (Dressel, 1987). In this theory, even marginalized men (ethnic/racial minority status or sexual orientation) benefit from a privileged status over women (McLean, 2003). For minority men this position of privilege over women holds the possibility that the men will have better work opportunities than the women, which would allow the men to have a slower pace of work than would be the case for women.

In sharp contrast, the experiences of female minority employees are possibly shaped by their lack of societal power, which may often offer less

desirable working conditions for women than for men. Lowered expectation due to gendered and racialized experiences can then explain why minority women reported higher levels of satisfaction with the “resources” provided by their work than men.

We further found no significant difference in the levels of satisfaction with work and personal life balance between minority women and minority men. This finding does not support our results indicating that female employees reported lower satisfaction than male employees with their work and personal life balance. This lack of significant difference between minority women and minority men regarding their reports of satisfaction with their work and personal life balance is worth noting as it contradicts research on gender issues.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this research study that should be addressed in further study on this subject. The satisfaction levels of participants could also be related to other extraneous factors, such as the department where they are employed. This is particularly significant since each department within social services might provide different levels of satisfaction. For example, child protection workers have reportedly higher levels of stress than any other social service workers. Further, study of job satisfaction in social service that continues to elucidate differences in satisfaction levels among each social service provider is recommended.

Implications

This study contributes to the scant literature on job satisfaction with findings about the relationship of gender and race to job satisfaction in the social services. This study of satisfaction is extremely relevant today as social service providers deal with increasing levels of need while funds for social service budgets nationwide are being cut. Since women constitute the majority of social service providers it is important to note their markedly lower levels of satisfaction than men on at least one attribute of job satisfaction. Interestingly, minority women have higher levels of satisfaction than Anglo-American/White women.

But minority female employees report lower levels of satisfaction on almost all attributes of job satisfaction when compared to minority male employees. An understanding of job satisfaction and how it relates to gender and race may facilitate the development of effective retention strategies. These strategies, implemented to ensure job satisfaction, will be especially pertinent as social services and social service workers face even greater challenges.

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