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A SURVEY ON WORK EXPERIENCES OF PRACTICING SOCIAL WORKERS
WHO ARE DISABLED

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Charles Robinson Freidel

June 1997

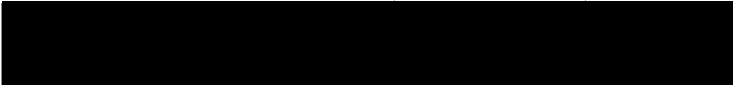
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ABSTRACT

This research is a survey of the work experiences of practicing disabled social workers.

Thirty-two questionnaires were sent out to practicing social workers who had identified themselves as disabled. Twenty-five responses were returned to the researcher.

The questionnaire asked questions in a yes/no format but allowed for comments, which were summarized.

What is revealed in this survey is the tremendous need for and will to work that we as individuals have, and the enormous amount of effort we are willing to exert to have our need for work met.

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DEFINITION

In 1990 the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) was put into effect (The Bureau of National Affairs, 1990).

Thus for the first time in American history, civil rights for disabled Americans was recognized as the law of the land (Thomson-Hoffman, 1991).

Earlier laws had granted civil rights for various aspects of the hardships that the disabled had to live with, such as access around barriers for the physically handicapped which required buildings to have ramps, and public rostrums to have special facilities to accommodate the handicapped in wheel chairs (Berkell, 1989). However, access has come to mean more than physical barriers, it has come to include reasonable accommodation (Gostin, 1993).

For the blind or visually impaired, reasonable accommodation has meant providing computers that 'talk' (Perritt, 1990).

For the mentally disabled, reasonable accommodation has meant providing more flexible work schedules and specialized supervision (Black, 1988). For those disabled with

learning disorders such as attention deficit disorder (ADD), reasonable accommodation might mean providing visual barriers and 'white' noise machines to screen out

distractions (Thompson-Hoffman,1991). In addition to making work possible for the disabled through access and reasonable accommodation, the ADA has provided prospective employers with the incentive for hiring the disabled and incurring the extra costs of reasonable accommodation through identifying the disabled as a minority group, along with women and racial and ethnic minorities, who are entitled to the benefits of affirmative action (Perritt,1990). Businesses that are making a reasonable attempt to be in compliance with federal and state affirmative action regulations benefit by hiring disabled persons who are qualified for the job.

PROBLEM FOCUS

The number of disabled persons able to enter the work force as a result of the passage of ADA is unknown. How the ADA has enabled the disabled to enter into the work force is what this study is interested in surveying. Specifically, this study is a positivist survey of the work experiences of disabled NASW members who are employed social workers. This study asks if these disabled NASW social workers have been given reasonable accommodation and access by their employer.

Furthermore, this study asks these NASW members if they disclosed their disability to their prospective employer before being hired and if it was included in their Vita. This study asks these NASW members who disclosed their disability after being hired if they received reasonable accommodation as a result.

The definition of disabled for the purposes of this study would be limited to chronic impairments such as visually impaired or blind, hearing impaired or deaf, physically impaired such as paraplegic, quadriplegic, maimed, chronic mentally disabled such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorders and major depressive disorders, chronic emotional disorders such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and learning disorders such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD). Basically the disability is considered severe enough that they would qualify for governmental benefits such as SSI and Rehabilitation. Inherent in this aspect of severity of disability is the assumption that they do not have to work, especially at the professional level that social work demands, unless they are highly motivated to overcome the disadvantages that their disability places upon

them. There is a wide range of life long, chronic disabilities that can not all be listed here, but there is a specific list that can be drawn from sources such as The Bureau of National Affairs(1990). This study is a survey and while some areas of inquiry can be placed into 'yes' and 'no' categories other questions might require brief descriptions. So while the study is positivist and quantitative, it has a qualitative part to it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research literature does not address the number or kinds of employment of disabled workers. Moreover there have not been any studies of the number of disabled persons who are social workers. It is a basic assumption of this survey that in fact there are social workers who are disabled. It is very disquieting that there is no research supporting this assumption. In Gibelman's Who We Are (1993), a national survey of NASW members was undertaken to discover our own demographics. Such attributes as race, ethnicity, age, income and gender were considered. Being disabled has become an attribute like having a minority status. However this aspect of 'who we are' was absent. A very good source

on demographics is Thompson-Hoffman's Disability in the United States (1991). As editor she has collected contributions covering many aspects of the disabled. However none of them deal with occupations. Gostin (1993) is a great piece of work but again there is nothing on occupations that disabled persons choose and nothing about social workers who are disabled. Perritt (1990) is good as a technically precise book on the ADA law, what it means, how it is to be interpreted and enacted. Wehman (1993) covers the concept of meaningful work as a human need, much like food and clothing, that the individual, no matter how disabled, has a right to have. Again, there are no surveys of occupations of disabled persons. Black (1988) goes into some detail on the value of work for the mentally ill disabled and outlines the kinds of sheltered workshops and work programs, such as Manpower that work with employers, much as the Department of Rehabilitation does, to place the mentally ill disabled in jobs. However this addresses only menial work and there is no consideration of the possibility of disabled mentally ill persons working above this level. Bolton (1987) is very useful in discussing the tests that are used to determine vocational aptitude of the disabled

but there is no information regarding the occupations in which disabled are actually placed. The most forthcoming author, Bauman (1962) is dated but provides actual descriptions of professional career choices for the visually impaired with problem solving strategies. In NASW's Encyclopedia of Social Work (1987) there is a very comprehensive discussion of disabilities and the role of social work towards the disabled but there are no studies of the number of disabled social workers or any other worker for that matter, or the number of disabled in general. In the 1990 US Census there are no demographics on disabled Americans who are employed.

PURPOSE AND DESIGN OF THE STUDY

This study is an exploration of the work experiences of disabled social workers who are members of NASW. The design utilizes the positivistic paradigm. Participants have been recruited through the placement of an advertisement in the NASW California News that ran on three different occasions asking for members of NASW that are currently employed as social workers to respond to the researcher's need for volunteers.

The assumption of this study, as discussed earlier in the introduction, is that there actually are members of NASW who are disabled and employed as social workers. The researcher has been unable to find any information in the literature that confirm this assumption. However, personal experience of the researcher has confirmed the existence of several such individuals. The research questions are:

- 1) What are the demographics, including disability of disabled social worker members of NASW?
- 2) Have these members disclosed their disability to their employer?

IF YES: a) Have these members received benefits such as access or reasonable accommodation as a result of this disclosure?

IF NO: b) Are these members afraid of loosing status, including being terminated, if they disclose?

4) For those that disclosed, did this disclosure occur before being hired such as on their vita?

IF NO: Did these members fear that disclosure would have harmed their chances of being hired?

Each question will be followed by a space to write brief details which will be summarized in the qualitative part of

the study. As this is an exploratory survey the hypotheses, follow directly from the assumptions made about the population of interest. The following are the hypotheses.

1. The majority of NASW Disabled Social Workers who are working have been able to become employed through Reasonable Accommodation and Access as mandated through ADA.

2. The majority of NASW Disabled Social Workers who are working have had SSI at one time.

3. The majority of NASW Disabled Social Workers who are working have used the Department of Rehabilitation to get training and placement for employment.

4. The majority of NASW Disabled Social Workers who are working have faced discrimination due to their disability.

As an exploratory study the researcher is just as interested in proving the null hypotheses to these hypotheses as validating them. Since there is no references in the literature review to employment statistics of disabled persons in general as well as the social work profession specifically, the researcher enters into the survey with assumptions based solely on personal experience and reflection. The researcher hopes to get a better view

inside of the disabled community through accessing the Internet and seeing if there are discussion groups around the subject. Also the researcher intends to test the questionnaire on disabled students within the Department for Services to Students with Disabilities at CSUSB. Moreover there may come to light hypothesis not yet considered through analyzing the data.

SAMPLING

The sample was drawn from the readership of the California NASW membership. There was an advertisement placed by the Task Force on Disability issues, now called the NASW California Council on Disability Issues of which the author is Vice Chair and a full time participant. From this recruitment of respondents, as the author has gathered thirty two participants. Of these, twenty-five have chosen to participate.

DATA COLLECTION AND INSTRUMENTS

A brief questionnaire has been used to collect data. The questionnaire consists of YES/NO questions. Each question is followed by a space to write brief details which are

summarized as the qualitative part of this research.

The strengths of the data collection is that by being in a YES/NO format there is a limited response that can be easily summed up into percentages of the whole.

PROCEDURE

The researcher has used the mailing list provided by three series of advertisement in the California NASW News to solicit volunteers. The researcher has no other members other than himself to collect the data.

DATA RESULTS

Thirty-two questionnaires were sent out to participants. Of those twenty-five responded. This is a very strong response rate of seventy-eight percent. Nineteen, 76%, of the respondents are female and six, 24%, are male. The average age of the female respondents is 46.89 and the average age of the male respondents is 44.

For both male and female the average age is 46.2. The youngest participant was a twenty-six year old female. The oldest participant was a six-eight year old female.

Twenty-two, 88%, of the participants are Caucasian.

One, 4%, is Mexican American. One, 4%, is

Euro-American/American Indian. One, 4%, is Celtic.

The average annual income of the participants is 33,608. The highest annual income is 60,000 and the lowest is 7,000.

The participants have a diverse number of disabilities. There are three participants who are learning disabled. There are three participants who have residual post polio related disabilities. There are two participants who are blind. There are two participants who are disabled as a result of brain injuries. There is one participant who is deaf and two who are hearing impaired. There is one participant who is disabled from osteoarthritis and one who is disabled from rheumatoid arthritis. There are eight that are mobility disabled. There is one participant who's disability is depression and a heart condition. There is one participant who's disability is stuttering. One participant has multiple sclerosis. One participant has cerebral palsy.

Asked about their job titles, Twelve, 48%, of the participants are practicing clinical social work, while eleven, 44%, are practicing casework, Two, 8%, are teaching

and one, 4%, is a social sciences analyst.

Seventeen, 68%, of the participants are MSWs, seven, 28%, are LCSWs, one, 4%, is a BSW and one, 4%, is a Ph.D..

Question eight asks: Do you think that your disability affects the way you perform as a social worker? Nineteen, 76%, of the participants said 'yes,' four, 16%, said 'no,' two, 8%, said 'yes&no,' and one, 4%, gave no response.

Question nine asks: 'If yes in what ways.' There were fourteen, 56%, positive responses, such as being more empathetic, and eight, 32%, negative responses such as no accommodation in work hours, etc.. These numbers do not add up to 100% as some people reported both negative and positive experiences and three, 12%, participants didn't respond.

Question ten asks if the participants disability requires accommodation. Seventeen, 68%, responded positively while eight, 32%, responded negatively.

Question eleven asks if the employer has provided needed accommodations. Thirteen, 52%, responded positively, eight, 32%, responded negatively, two, 8%, responded both positively and negatively, and one, 4%, responded 'N/A.'

Question twelve asks if the participant has ever received financial assistance from the government due to their disability. twelve, 48%, said yes, ten, 40%, said no, and four, 16%, said both yes and no. Of those that answered yes, ten, 40%, received State Rehabilitation, seven, 28%, received SSI, five, 20%, received SSA, one, 4%, scholarship, and one covered by employer's disability coverage.

Question thirteen asks participants if they disclose their disability if it is not visible. eleven, 44%, said yes, two, 8%, said no, six, 24%, gave no response and one, 4%, said both yes and no. Of the comments, there were three basic positive responses. The five, 20%, participants said that they disclosed to: 1)very close associates; peers and family; 2)when necessary to a new client; 3)and to everyone, as "It is important that they understand."

One of the positive respondents stipulated that she would not disclose for interview purposes for fear of discrimination.

Of the six, 24%, participants that made negative comments, there was basically two concerns expressed 1)the fear of stigma, of being treated differently in a negative way and of 2)discrimination in the interview process. There is a

third area of disclosure that concerns accessibility. Four participants, 16%, disclosed to supervisor and others when they felt it would be in their best interest to secure an accommodation.

Question fifteen asks 'Under what circumstances do you disclose?' Fourteen, 56%, participants responded to this question with comments. Of the positive responses, three, 12%, participants said that they always disclosed at the first meeting. The other eleven, 44%, said that they disclosed only when there is a sense of trust and a very small risk involved. One participant responded: "After much time and once I trust those I work with not to fear my difference, in other words---never!"

Question sixteen asks: "Are there time when you don't disclose?" Eleven 44% said yes, two 8% said, no, 4 16% said N/A, and 8, 32% gave no response.

Of the comments, four, 16%, said when they are comfortable, understand the disability and mainly in areas other than work.

Of the negative comments seven, 28%, said that they were afraid of discrimination, stigma, prejudice, and being treated differently once others know. One participant

stated: "...Also while being considered for social work positions in oncology, I was immediately discredited when I disclosed a history of cancer. (While this is illegal, it's very hard to prove.)"

Question seventeen asks: "Have you received assistance or special services from Colleges or Universities such as an office or department of services to students with disabilities?" Ten, 40%, answered yes, fifteen, 60%, answered no, and 1, 4%, gave no response. Fourteen, 56%, responded with comments. Of the fourteen comments all are very positive about Student Services with Disabilities except for one participant who said: "I have no idea of how to approach them and have been strongly discouraged by my employer."

Question eighteen asks: "Are you actively involved in an organization for people who are disabled like yourself?" Fifteen, 60%, answered yes, nine, 36%, answered no, and one, 4%, answered both yes and no. There were 21, 84%, comments of which only three, 12%, were negative. Of the three the main reason for not participating was a lack of energy.

Question nineteen asks: "Would you be interested in joining or supporting the NASW California chapter's Council

on Disability issues. Out of the twenty-five participants, there were no negative responses to this question. Sixteen, 64% said yes, and 12, 48% said 'already am,' with one, 4%, no response. Of the 'yes's and 'already am's there were 4, 12%, who answered to both. Of the comments there were 12, 48%, responses. There were 5 positive respondents that were enthusiastic in advocating for ourselves. One in particular stands out: "YES - PLEASE. I am very interested in becoming involved in any way that I can." Of the negative comments, there were complaints about being too far away to get to.

Question twenty asks: "Did you enjoy this questionnaire?" 17, 68%, said yes, 2, 8%, said no, 3, 12% gave no response, 1, 4%, said N/A, 1, 4%, said both 'yes and no' and 1, 4%, said "?". 19, 76%, responded with comments. Most, 15, 60% of respondents commented positively, that they were happy to have an opportunity to address disability and social work and to think about things---and that more of this type of thing needs to be done. Four, 12% of respondents commented negatively citing that it was one more form to fill out and one said that she would rather "A vacation in Puerto Vallarta." The author agrees.

Question twenty-one asks: "Do you have any suggestions

about further research or how this questionnaire could have been better?" Twelve, 48%, said yes and seven, 28%, said no. Four, 16% gave no response. Sixteen, 64%, responded with comments. Eleven, 44%, were constructive and there will be an attempt to incorporate them in future questionnaires. Of the questions that participants wanted asked the issue of discrimination on the job and in interviewing was prominent.

Of the three, 12%, negative responses: one participant wanted a scale of 1 to 5 (Likert scale), one wanted more space to write in, and one felt that they could better answer the questions if they knew the goals of the questionnaire.

DISCUSSION

From the data we can see that the majority of participants wanted to have a positive input into the research. For one thing, the response rate was overwhelming (78%). Income level covered a surprisingly wide range with two participants reporting \$60,000 and the lowest being 7,000. The average income was a good strong \$33,608. The issue of ethnic diversity is a bit discouraging---only one Mexican American, one Indian/European and one Celtic. The

diversity begins with the number of different kinds of disabilities. Some people have multiple disabilities and some just one. However, most had more than one.

On the issue of disclosure and the why, and when of it, the researcher was not surprised by the results. Most will disclose only when absolutely necessary. And following this comes fear of stigma and discrimination. Generally subjects disclosed to their immediate supervisor, only or especially when needed accommodations were requested. One participant who had an 'invisible' disability said that he never discloses. From these questions (14,15,&16) subjects disclosed stories of discrimination.

An overwhelming majority responded positively to joining the NASW California Chapter on Disabled Issues. There were no negative responses to the question. Under the 'comments' box however many felt that it was too far away or too hard to attend.

On question twenty, the researcher was looking to see if any of the participants disliked the interview. Aside from this purpose, the question allows subjects to express their anger.

On question twenty-one, the researcher was hoping to

get feed-back information as to how to make a better interview. There was a lot of good information that will be put to use in the next research project.

CONCLUSION

From this gathering of data the researcher feels an affinity for the disabled and a striving towards a better future. We can not exist in a vacuum and as disabled individuals; we need to reach out towards our non-disabled peers, colleagues and friends. There appears to be a wall between us and as disabled social workers it behests our effort to help the abled understand and appreciate our lives, in the very least. We strive for even better things, accommodation and accessibility. For those of us who are able bodied but disabled, it might very well be understanding and patience when we behave differently by being too slow, too fast, too busy and too tired.

This study is addressed to our social work colleagues. We implore you to look into your self and consider ways in which you have not been as sensitive or understanding as you could have been and I might add, should have been. When you start to see things from the disabled point of view, then

concepts such as accommodation and access become second nature and not foreign ideas.

The participants in this survey conveyed two main principles over and over again. The first was "Thank you for doing this." That is thanks for paying attention to this area of inquiry. More needs to be done, and it shall. The second thing is the poignancy of their anger at the world, at the people who aren't disabled, for not really 'seeing' them, ignoring them and their problems and not accepting them into their world. Moreover, it is important to point out that the world of the able bodies person IS the same world of the disabled person, only harder.

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