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ROMANIAN SOCIAL CARE WORKERS' EXPOSURE TO WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

Empirical study

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Abstract

Workplace violence in the social care sector is not a problem that appeared overnight. It was and still is a major concern, and its disastrous effects, on both organization and employees have been largely documented in various papers and studies around the world. This study analyzes social care workers' perceptions and experiences with workplace violence, phenomenon which has been largely ignored in the Romanian research field, and is still considered a taboo subject in the organizational environment. Even if most employers recognize its general existence they tend to deny or refuse to accept that their institution or company is affected by it. The present paper will provide information concerning problematic issues in studying the phenomenon and will try to provide an image of the social care workers' perception and attitude towards risk and workplace violence. The research will try to identify differences in experience, exposure and resistance to violence in the workplace based on various variables like sex or job characteristics.

Introduction

Workplace violence has received increased attention in the field or research worldwide, and it has been recognized as a major issue that affects not only the direct victims of this phenomena but also the indirect ones (witnesses to workplace violence, victim's family members and other people around them) and also the organization itself.

Starting with the 1980s, violence has been recognized as one of the main causes of work related deaths.

Data collected from the 1992 – 1996 National Crime Victimization Survey, in the US indicated that over 2 million citizens were victimized during working hours. Workplace violence and homicide were also recognized as the types of violence with the fastest rise regarding frequency. (Carll, 1999).

Although the subject has been approached in various studies in different countries, by specialist in the field or international organizations fighting against it, empirical research in the aria is still considered limited.

For instance, for the organizational environment of interest to this paper, meaning the field of social care services, using the terms "workplace violence" and "social work" in the EBSCO Academic Search Complete search engine will only generate 9 empirical studies. This is considered a very small number, considering the fact that this data base contains the majority of studies and research materials dedicated to the field of social work and occupational health for the 2001 – 2011 period of time, and correlating it with the vast diversity of services provided by these institutions, to different categories of individual, which exposes the employees to a large number or risks regarding workplace violence.(O'Neil et al., 2003).

Workplace violence – definitions and typologies

In discussing the conceptualization of violence, some authors consider it important to mention and emphasize the idea that violence is both a process and an act in itself. After a careful analysis of violent incidents they concluded that adopting a violent behaviour is actually the culmination of a long series of problems, conflicts, disputes or failures that have had a negative evolution with the passing of time. The same seems to be the case for incidents of workplace violence. (Fein et al., 1995)

Different authors use different terms when referring to workplace violence. One of these is occupational violence, which is defined as any type of behaviour or action with the intent to harm former or present work colleagues, or even the organization as a whole.

Regarding this term, other researchers mention a distinction or a different nuance that should be taken under consideration. For instance it is argued that the term occupational violence should be used only when talking about situation in which the type of violence is specific or closely linked to the nature of the activities performed during work hours. This best describes the cases of attacks, especially physical ones, coming from clients, beneficiaries or other individuals and directed at employees of work fields like security and defence (e.g. police men), the health care sector, social care sector, etc. (Mullen, 1997)

Authors with similar opinions argue that this type of incidents should not be included or described as cases of workplace violence, but as cases of occupational violence, because the aggressors are mainly people outside of the institution or organization and have no connection the organization's politics or practices. (Neuman & Baron, 1998)

Conceptualizing workplace violence is a process that encounters a lot of challenges, especially because of the

different forms of violence which can be included in the definition of the phenomenon and because of the fact that researchers have not been consistent in exploring this issue. (Barling, 1996)

The fact that the line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours is more often than not very unclear and mostly influenced by personal perceptions, context and cultural factors is another important factor that hinders the process of reaching an agreement regarding a universally accepted definition of the term. (Chappell & Di Martion, 2006)

The level of novelty of the research in this field can be considered one of the reasons for all the difference regarding published statistical information, situation which results in a lack of understanding regarding what specific acts of violence should or should not be contained in the descriptive instruments (Baron, 1993). These descriptive differences can lead to confusion and results that differ from study to study, and that cannot be compared based on any kind of criterion.

A solution to this issue would be the approach of the term as an umbrella term that encompasses all situations that range from incidents or acts of violence with the lowest level of severity, to incidents and acts of violence with the highest levels of victimization (O'Neil et al., 2003).

Some of the most popular definitions of the term were provided by different international organizations and specialists in the files.

According to Bowie (1996), workplace violence can be a verbal or emotional act, a threat or physical attack, be it real or only perceived, directed at a single individual or a property by an individual, a group or even an organization, during working hours.

Another attempt defines workplace violence as a concept that refers to specific situations that imply direct physical aggression or threats, and behaviours that give legitimate reason to the target to feel like their safety is in danger (Mayhew & Cappell, 2002; Neuman & Baron, 1998).

A first attempt to reach an agreement regarding the definitions of workplace violence has been made during a meeting of experts organized by the European Commission in Dublin, in May 1994. During the meeting it was proposed that the term be defined as incidents or situations in which people are abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances related to the workplace, and which have implicit or explicit effects on the victim's health, wellbeing and feeling of safety. The term abuse is being used here to indicate all the unreasonable behaviours, and it implies the inadequate use of physical power. The term threat refers to the declaration of intent regarding actions meant to an individual, a property, while the term attack is used to describe any attempt to physically harm the victim (Wynne et al., 1996).

Another term which also encounters different difficulties when it comes to the aspects of conceptualization, especially when used in the field of workplace violence research is the term "workplace", which in most cases refers to a specific area, office or building, different commercial settings, etc.

This aspect possesses a problem when discussing the variety of occupational activities that imply frequent travels or different settings, outside of those mentioned earlier, which is also the case in the field of social workers.

Reviewing the literature on the subject we will notice that different authors use different terms to refer to acts of violence. Among these we mention the following series of concepts: mobbing (Leyman, 1996; Zapf et al., 1996), harassment (Bjorkqvistet al., 1994), bullying (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996; Vartia, 1996), victimization (Einarsen and Raknes, 1997), psychological terror (Leymann, 1990).

This brings us to the topic of the classification of violent acts in the literature.

Different authors have made different proposals and have indicated different criteria on which they based their typologies. The most detailed one and the most popular one is the classification proposed by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). This was picked up by Bowie and completed by Bowie. Using the three types of workplace violence identified by the OSHA, he added one more category to the classification and examples of violent acts to support his approach. As a result, the following were the four types of violent acts identified: type I, external violence or intrusive violence (e.g. unknown aggressors with criminal intent, terrorist attacks, acts of violent as forms of protest, acts of violence related to mental disorders or drug use), type II, consumer/ client related violence (acts of violence directed at employees by clients, consumers, patients, etc. and the other way around), type III, violence linked to interpersonal relations/interactions (acts of violence among employees, bullying, domestic violence spilled over into the workplace) and type IV, organizational violence (directed against employees), situation in which certain specifics or characteristics of the organization lead to an increased level of risk regarding the victimization of its employees (Gill, Fisher and Bowie, 2002).

The specifics of workplace violence the field of social work

Research conducted in the United States showed that employees working in fields like mental health and social work are the ones most exposed to the risk of victimization. According to different sources that compare the level of absenteeism as a consequence of exposure to violence, and assaults especially, from the fields of mental health and social work to other occupational fields, both in the private sector and the public one, the average number of days missed from work is two times higher for employees of the first 2 fields of activity in the private sector and four times higher in the public sector (Zelnick et al., 2013).

For the purpose of this paper and the research presented we mention the fact that the phrase "employees of the social work field" was used referring to all the individuals employed in any kind of institution providing social care services.

Regarding the most vulnerable category of individuals, other results have nominated the employees that conduct activities in the environment of the patients or clients they work with. That is why they stress the importance of employee safety, issue that is considered ignored and not a priority of the management of such institutions (Breakwell & Rowett, 1989).

Another important topic is the one concerning influential factors or characteristics that would describe a high risk job. Among these we can list the following particularities: direct and constant contact with the public/patients or clients; conducting evaluations, inspections, foreclosures and other similar activities; working or transporting valuable goods, money, or different types of medicine that can only be obtained by prescription, etc.; working in the counselling, education or health, providing services of different types; working directly with unstable or high risk individuals; working in places where alcohol is served; working directly or having constant contact with the community; working in small groups or even alone or in secluded spaces; working the night shifts, during periods of instability or organizational and/or political change; direct contact with other people outside the organization or institution during working hours; activities that imply providing services to people with special needs or that find themselves in a situation of risk; working in an environment exposed to violence; working

in military organizations or in conflict areas, etc. (Chappell & Di Martino, 2006)

Because we are discussing the issue of characteristics concerning the appearance and evolution of workplace violence in the social work field we have to mention the characteristics that are specific to the nature of activities of these employees.

The most important one is the fact that in the field of social work, during the activities that need to be performed, employees may encounter more than just one of the situations listed above, leading to a very high level of exposure to risk and workplace violence. For instance one employee, during his work hours, come into contact with people in different risk situations (suffering from a mental illness, intoxicated with different substances, etc.), can encounter the need to travel to the environment of a certain client or beneficiary (a bad neighbourhood,), by himself or in the best case scenario accompanied by a colleague.

Considering the particularities of this field of activity we can make a few observations. In the cases of workplace violence where the aggressors are people from outside the institution, beneficiaries or clients, the aggressive behaviour can, most of the time be the culmination or an act of desperation due to the extreme conditions of risk or of the unfulfilled basic needs.

Although this is not a valid excuse, the truth is that in many cases desperation can be the starting point of an attitude of revolt against a system or a certain type of treatment perceived as unfair or unjust, and can escalate to acts of violence.

A few studies have approached this issue also and have come up with results that argue that the employees that are the most vulnerable to risk are those who come in contact or work with people that are in conflict with the law, alcohol and drug consumers, and employees that worked in child protection departments, while on the opposite pole, the safest employees of this field were those working with the elderly and the people in need of medical assistance. (Newhill, 2003).

Perceptions and attitudes regarding victimization and exposure to workplace violence among Romanian employees from the social work field

The objectives of this research were to identify the participant's perception regarding what is and what is not an act of violence, regarding exposure to different types of workplace violence, who are the perpetrators, what are factors that raise the level of risk and what are the best measures to fight against it and last but not least how these experiences affected their attitude towards violence.

Participants and data collection

In order to achieve these objectives a number of 30 themed, semi structured interviews were conducted.

Besides the relevant questions regarding the experiences with workplace violence, details concerning sex, age, job and seniority were requested.

Among the 30 participant 25 of them were females and 5 males. The disparity between the representations of both sexes was due to the fact that, in general, the men are underrepresented in this work field but also because of the reluctance and refusal of male employees to take part in the study.

The age of the female participants ranged from 28 to 59, with an average of 43 years, while the men's age ranged between 26 and 57, with an average of 43 years also.

The people interview occupied one of the following jobs: social worker, psychologist, counsellor, educational instructor, union president, head of department or centre, stoker, nurse or other medical personal, inspector, seamstress, security agent and therapist.

The institution or centre types that these employees conducted their activity in were foster centres (one for boys and one for girls), centres for integration through

occupational therapy, emergency social centres for homeless people, day time centres for children in risk situations and these centres' own apparatus (Directia Generala de Asistenta Sociala si Protectia Copilului si Serviciul Public Local de Asistenta Sociala).

From the total of 30 participants, 25 of them agreed to have the interviews taped. In the other 5 cases we used the "pen and paper" method to record the significant information.

The first mention we have to make is that the subject of this study was met with a very high level of resistance and refusal to participate, most of the employees contacted expressing doubts about the purpose of the research, about their information reaching their superiors or the media and so on. This is explainable and on some level was expected because of the characteristics of the area in which we conducted out study.

The interviews represented only one of the activities of the research process and were conducted in a city that very little exposure to this kind of activities, which means the level of unfamiliarity to it lead to suspicions and questions regarding issues of anonymity, access to information and the purpose of the study.

Also the topic of workplace violence is one that is still taboo in the organizational environment, the term itself having a very negative connotation, which made people feel uncomfortable at first.

Results of data analysis

Employees from the social work field, based on the nature of their activities have the responsibilities to help people that find themselves in different situations of need, that are generally termed risk situations. As a result they do not wish to conduct their work schedules in an atmosphere of constant tension and fear for their own safety.

On top of that, because of the specifics of the field and the relationship they try to form with the people they supply services to, in most cases the simple mentioning of violence from a client can seem to some of them a violation or betrayal of the partnership that the employee tries to build.

Another opinion vastly spread among professionals in this field is that discussing this issue can contribute to the victimization of the clients or beneficiaries they work with, that are already facing a difficult situation.

The literature on the subject identifies a certain orientation in the values and ideology of the profession, orientation that can lead to a tendency to ignore, deny or cover up violent incidents in which employees are victims of beneficiaries or clients. Others consider talking about these incidents, especially when the clients involved present certain characteristics (chronic diseases or illnesses, extreme risk situations, etc.)a violation of ethic in a profession centred on the needs of the client or beneficiary. (Leadbetter, 1993)

Concerning the results reached, we consider that they confirm findings from other important international studies.

Most of the participants that were interviewed declared that they considered verbal abuse as violence. Although some of the participants denied being exposed to other forms of violence except verbal, or that incidents of physical violence were or are still encountered during work hours, most of them contradicted these first statements during their narratives related to different experiences of risk situation at the workplace.

Regarding vulnerability and factors that negatively impact the level of exposure to violence, based on the participants' answers the following list was created:

- Activities that imply direct and prolonged contact with the beneficiaries of different services;
- Working with clients / beneficiaries with special needs (different levels of handicap, various levels of

mental deficiencies, people with chronic illnesses, addicts, etc).

- People who often visit the residence of clients or beneficiaries in order to perform evaluations of different types.

The employees that seem to find themselves doing activities which have the most similarities with the above mentioned characteristics have been identified as: social workers, nurses, educational instructors, therapists, and especially those that work in residential centres.

On the opposite side, the respondents considered that the safes colleagues from this field were those who worked in offices or buildings to which access was under supervision or just more restricted.

As results of other studies have shown, our results confirmed that the most frequent form of workplace violence that employees were exposed to was verbal abuse, in different forms, ranging from malicious rumours or gossip, inappropriate sexual jokes and curses to verbal threats.

It was also noticed that, according to participants' stories, perpetrators which clenched their fists, jaw or displayed other visible manifestations of anger or aggression induced higher levels of intimidation and psychological discomfort even if the situation did not evolve past that stage. The same effect was notices in situations in which aggressive clients let out steam on inanimate objects such as chairs, tables or other objects from offices. This is explained through the installation of anticipation and /or fear, because as it is widely known, acts of violence are usually preceded by manifestations of anger or rage.

Although the context in which this kind of incidents occur have a great impact on the way the victim perceives and interprets it, this issue raises an analytical problem: particular behaviours or acts will be considered violent in one context or situation, while in a different context or situation they will not, even if this difference of value is not dictated by factors that can be manipulated or controlled by the perpetrators. This means that the power of a threat or of any behaviour with the purpose of intimidating does not lie in the actions of the aggressor but in the victim's evaluation of the risk.

In other words, the analytical problems mentioned before refers to whether or not intimidation or threat, like beauty, lies in the eyes of the beholder.

The instances of workplace violence mentioned in the stories provided by the participants referred only to situations in which an employee was attacked by a client.

A particularity of the narratives regarding a physical violence was that the participants often mentioned finding themselves involved in incidents that did not directly involved them. Most of the incidents were described as cases in which clients or beneficiaries were fighting and the employee had to intervene to stop it, motivating the intervention on work responsibilities and possible repercussions in case "things got ugly". These were mostly identified by employees from residential centres, especially in the foster care ones, where the beneficiaries were children starting from age 7 and going up to age 18, and in special cases age 22 and 26.

Also there was one single case in which an employee, a female educational instructor in a foster care centre, mentioned that her car was damaged by the boyfriend or friends of one of the residents.

According to the observations made and the answers given by the participants we could conclude that the attitude regarding workplace violence was one of acceptance and resignation, especially among female participants which argued that they are old and they couldn't get a job anywhere else, so they have to cope with the situation here.

A lot of the examples of violent acts mentioned during the interviews had the distinct characteristic of appearing "out of the blue", which in the opinion of the participants makes thing worse since they have no time to take precautionary measures or avoid the situation. These incidents are explained through mood swings of the beneficiaries during the day, discontent with the food or any other aspects of life in the centre, etc, or with simple statement like "sometimes they just wake up on the wrong side of the bed" (Maria, 52, educational instructor).

While most of the cases of physical violence were short lived and perceived as not very serious, there were few of the respondents offered details of incident that could easily be classified as life threatening: having a knife pointed at your neck (example given by Angela, 42, educational instructor, but referring to a situation she had witnessed), almost being grabbed by the neck (Angela 42, as a victim), clients or beneficiary throwing different object at the employees, like an axe, scissors, bowls and cups, etc.

During the interviews the participants were also asked to mention if there were any measures at an organizational level that could help prevent these kinds of incidents and help them feel safer during work hours.

The most frequent answers were: hiring more people (most of the employees considered the number of personal insufficient for the amount of work needed), hiring more men, hiring a security guard, and implementing a working and efficient system of penalties for violent beneficiaries or clients.

Another objective of this study was to identify if the employees perceive differences in the levels of victimization or exposure to violence between females and males. Regarding this issue, 2 men and one woman argued that they didn't not perceive any difference in this matter but the woman later came to contradict her initial statements, arguing that she would like more male colleagues and that working the same shift as a male colleague leaves her with a better sense of safety.

Other 2 women argued that since they do not have many male colleagues they do not know whether or not there would be any differences.

The rest of the participants all agreed that women are seen as easy targets while men are not. They argued that men seem to be treated with more respect and their simple presence seems to inhibit certain violent manifestations.

One of the educational instructors mentioned that although she agrees that there are slight differences in the victimization of men and women in her field of work, those were only valid in cases of physical violence, because according to her, "when it comes to verbal abuse they do not care if you are a man or a woman" (Mariana, 57).

Another necessary mention is the fact that all most participants avoided answering questions about incidents of workplace violence among colleagues, Employees and superiors, mentioning only the fact there are the occasional conflicts or misunderstandings that are normal and probably occur everywhere, in every workplace.

We said almost because there were 4 participants which, despite the fact that at first did not want to talk about it, they later revealed that they were victims of mobbing (2 women), heard of someone being a victim of mobbing (1 person) or participated in acts of harassment towards a superior with the intention of making her quit.

The first two cases, two female victims of mobbing were visibly affected by the recollection of the facts which eventually lead to pausing the interview and abandoning the subject. Another woman mentioned the case of one of the victims of mobbing but declared she does not know details because at that time she was on leave and only heard about it when she returned.

Regarding the attitude adopted by the two victims, one said that she decided that she would no longer interact with her fellow colleagues, concentrating on her responsibilities and her activities with the beneficiaries (she was an occupational therapist), while the other said that she eventually confronted the people who started the incident and made sure everybody knew what happened, arguing that as long as she knew she did nothing wrong she was going to fight it (Mariana, 43, nurse). The person who mentioned knowing about the mobbing was the head of the centre (Camelia, 38) and she was referring to the case of Mariana.

An interesting detail is that both cases occurred in the same centre but one was recent.

The other case, was recounted by Alina (28, psychologist) who remembered that a few years back, a new director was brought in for a predetermined period but she was perceived as not fitting in so all the members from that department sabotaged her and wrote memos demanding that she be fired. Among the actions took to sabotage her actions, she mentioned an incident where the entire department did not attend a meeting scheduled. Also she mentioned instances where she was directly told that "if three people tell you you're drunk you should go to sleep" and her authority was questioned in public.

The respondent explains that in the end the group of people that put all this into action got what they wanted and the target was moved to another department after being deemed a "bad match" for that job.

As a conclusion we need to mention that the general opinion of the participants was that they did not feel safe at work but that they have become accustomed to working in a continuous state of tension.

Also, although at first the rate of answers considered socially desirable was extremely high, once the participants started talking freely and uninterrupted the quantity of information was sufficient and allowed us to draw realistic conclusion in regards to the subject of this study.

The results reached did not only provide answers to our research questions but also pointed out new questions that could very well serve as directions for other research activities.

One of these can be why don't the participants consider themselves victims of physical violence when they were harmed trying to separate or stop a fight between two or more beneficiaries?

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