Staff Burnout in Shelters for Battered Women: A Challenge for the ’90s

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In recent years, considerable concern has been expressed about vulnerability to burnout among staff and volunteers in shelters for battered women. There can be little question that there is a basis for this concern, given the multiple roles, work overload, exposure to danger and to extreme crises and distress which are endemic to shelters. Although shelter workers have not been studied empirically, other human service providers who have frequent exposure to danger and crises, such as police and emergency room personnel, have been found to have particularly rapid burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1982). Moreover, anecdotal and speculative accounts have argued that a number of more specific job stressors which can aggravate burnout are typical of shelters. Ferraro (1983), McKenna (1987), Mickish (1987), and Pahl (1985) identified job stressors including role strain, inter-staff conflict, lack of perceived support from the community or peers, work overload, lack of clarity about shelter goals or operating philosophy, and failure to involve staff in programming and policy decisions. Shelter administrators may find staff burnout an area of increasing concern as many shelters begin their second decade of operation and staff members struggle to maintain their commitment and energy in the face of variable working conditions after several years of shelter work.

During the 1980s, women organizing shelters responded to the shock of identifying the needs of battered women. With a decade of shelter experience, administrators and staff members have become more sophisticated about providing the kinds of support and promoting the social change necessary for battered women. This evolution has included an increased awareness of the toll that caring takes on the workers at shelters. The challenges of the nineties will include findings ways of avoiding burnout for those dedicated to helping battered women and their children. A second major challenge will be the provision of care for children at shelters, most of whom have been traumatized by witnessing the battering of their mothers, and by further disruptions involved in their mothers’ attempts to escape. Raising money for children’s programs was cited as a primary concern by administrators at shelters across the nation (Epstein, Russell, and Silvern, 1988).

What is Burnout?

Burnout refers to “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment” (Maslach & Jackson, 1982). All of these aspects of burnout are important to staff welfare and thus, to shelter operations. But depersonalization, in particular, strikes at the ideological core of shelter goals. The shelter movement has been characterized by the basic intention not to treat those they serve as cases, but as individual, autonomous persons, and fellow human beings (Epstein, Russell, & Silvern, 1988; Ferraro, 1983). Depersonalization results in negative, cynical attitudes about recipients.

While some have argued that the emphasis on treating individuals rather than cases is found in feministic-oriented shelters more than those that are professionally oriented (Ferraro, 1983; Schechter, 1982), our research found few organizational or behavioral distinctions related to such orientation (Epstein, Russell, & Silvern, 1988). All battered women’s shelters appear to be influenced by feminist ideology to some extent, and depersonalization is an issue of considerable concern within most shelters.

Working Conditions and Burnout

Among others, Mickish (1987) and Maslach & Jackson (1982) found that staff burnout can be reduced. Studies of burnout among human service workers in other areas have found a range of contributing factors including ambiguity or conflict regarding staff roles and responsibilities, exclusion from the policy making process, lack of staff cohesion, inadequate administrative support, insufficient worker autonomy, and job pressures (Maslach & Jackson, 1982; Moos & Moos, 1983; Pines, 1982). One purpose of the present study was to see if the same factors contribute to staff burnout in battered women’s shelters. In addition, other factors such as adherence to professional versus feminist ideologies were examined.

A further question that the research examined relates to administrative decisions for dealing with staff burnout. For example, while greater involvement in the decision making process may be beneficial it can also lead to overwork and job stress.

The research tried to evaluate whether all aspects of working conditions equally affect burnout, and what kind of tradeoffs are necessary given the basic conditions of shelter operations which are demand for services greater than available resources and strong adherence to principles of individual worth and the avoidance of
depersonalization.

Effect of Burnout on Duration of Employment
It is generally assumed that the individual worker's susceptibility to burnout increases with length of employment. However, the literature cited above has focused on the effect of working conditions without relating them to time factors. This suggests that burnout results from adverse working conditions, and that it could be avoided by changing them. This may be an overly optimistic view that can lead to failure and reduce staff morale if such changes have no effect. Not only can much effort be wasted but recriminations and greater burnout can result from precipitous change that ignores the effect of length of employment. In fact, alternative strategies may be appropriate for workers with differing levels of seniority.

The Study of Shelter Workers

Factors studied. In the present study, aspects of working conditions were identified based on reports from shelter workers and their relationship to burnout analyzed. Feelings of inadequate personal achievement, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization were evaluated using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (1981). Working conditions were measured primarily by the Work Environment Scale (Insel & Moos, 1974), which examines factors considered relevant to job burnout in general as well as factors specific to shelters. The importance of professional versus feminist ideology to the work environment was assessed by using interview questions developed by Epstein, Russell, and Silvern (1988).

The conditions studied included:

- Burnout
- Emotional exhaustion
- Depersonalization
- Sense of accomplishment

Employment
- Seniority

Working conditions
- Working hours
- Peer support
- Participation in decisions
- Autonomy

Organizational philosophy
- Feminist goals and ideology
- Professional goals and ideology

Respondents were asked whether they endorsed giving higher priority to the feminist goal of "changing societal patterns of violence against women" or "providing treatment and support of battered women." Other questions also assessed participants' belief in the feminist explanation that battering is caused by patriarchal social values versus the explanation that battering is caused by individual characteristics and psychopathology. The length of participant employment and the number of hours worked per week were also analyzed in relation to their level of burnout.

Participants. Survey questionnaires were sent to 18 shelters selected from a pool of 111 identified in the earlier research by Epstein, Russell, and Silvern (1988). Questionnaires were completed by 47 staff members, including executive directors, from 11 of the 18 shelters. In order to ensure that staff burnout would be a potential problem, shelters asked to participate had been established for at least 4 years with substantial operating budgets, and at least 3 full-time equivalent paid positions. Selection also considered ideological diversity (that is, a feminist versus professional only operating philosophy).

Participating shelters averaged 6.5 years of operation, budgets of $204,000, and 6.7 full-time equivalent staff positions. Respondents from these shelters were employed an average of 2 1/2 years with a range from 0 to 6 1/4 years. Five of the respondents were executive directors, 17 were women's counselors or advocates, 7 were children's counselors and 18 occupied various other positions.

Methodology. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Method was used to analyze simple relationships between length of employment and working conditions and each of the three aspects of burnout identified above. Multiple regression analyses were used to analyze more complex questions, such as whether working conditions are related to burnout above and beyond the effect of length of employment and whether working conditions affect employees with more seniority differently than newer employees.

Major Findings of the Study

The problem of burnout among respondents. Respondents were asked about their experience with burnout with reference to the three factors described above. When these results were compared with national norms reported by Maslach and Jackson (1981) for a more general group of services workers, it was found that these shelter workers were significantly less emotionally exhausted, had fewer feelings of depersonalization, and had a higher sense of personal accomplishment than the national norms. (See Epstein, 1988, for details of the statistical analysis.)

Emotional exhaustion. The study found that emotional exhaustion was associated with length of employment; the longer the term of employment, the greater the level of exhaustion to be expected. Moreover, most of the working conditions that the study examined, did not appear to affect the onset of burnout. Only involvement in the decision making process showed a positive relationship to emotional exhaustion. McKenna (1986) suggested that such involvement would minimize burnout.
However, while the study showed that involvement appeared to reduce emotional exhaustion for workers with greater seniority, it was associated with more exhaustion in the case of recently hired workers. When the type of involvement was examined, it was found that, while involvement in decisions involving individual residents showed the positive effect, participation in more general policy or administrative decisions was not associated with less burnout even for workers with greater seniority.

Depersonalization. In contrast to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization was found to be associated with working conditions and unrelated to seniority. The strongest associations were with high peer cohesion, and greater autonomy. Respondents reported that they were less likely to see shelter residents as depersonalized cases when they received emotional support and caring from their co-workers and when they felt that they could exercise autonomy in making decisions. This was the case for respondents at all levels of seniority.

Studies by Maslach and Jackson (1982) and Pines (1983) suggested the importance of cohesion in reducing burnout. The present study also examined specific aspects of cohesion, whether cohesion is helpful specifically because it encourages affective sharing (sharing of attitudes and emotions). Respondents were asked about the extent to which expression of anger, joy, calm, sadness, hopelessness, and fear were part of their working conditions. They were also asked about the frequency of such expressions in order to determine the extent to which affective sharing was part of the working environment.

Respondents reported that feelings of depersonalization were associated with frequency of anger. Based on these reports, anger appears to be an intrinsic aspect of the experience of depersonalization. In addition, respondents indicated that sharing anger had no effect on feelings of depersonalization unlike the sharing of positive affect which appears to help reduce burnout. Depersonalization was also found to be relatively high in shelters where respondents reported less frequently shared experiences of joy and calm about their work than in shelters where such sharing was reported to be engaged in regularly.

Sense of personal accomplishment. Like depersonalization, sense of personal accomplishment was shown to be more responsive to working conditions and not associated with seniority. Involvement in solving (non-administrative) shelter problems, participation in making decisions about particular residents, and working longer hours showed the strongest association with sense of personal accomplishment. While involvement in solving problems for individual residents appeared to contribute to emotional exhaustion for newly hired workers (see above), such involvement also contributed to a greater sense of personal accomplishment for new and more senior employees alike.

Ambiguity about roles and responsibilities was not in itself associated with sense of personal accomplishment. However, evaluation of the interaction between role ambiguity and participation in decision making suggests that participation in decisions may have created a sense of personal accomplishment, primarily for respondents who had a clear idea of where their jobs began and ended. In this evaluation a general measure of participation was used that incorporated several types of decisions.

Feminist vs. professional goals and ideologies. While respondents expressed differences in their priorities regarding feminist and professional goals and ideology, most respondents acknowledged the importance of both. This finding contradicts studies that found shelters to be sharply ideologically distinct from one another (Schechter, 1982; Ferraro, 1983).

There were no statistically significant relationships between the ideological orientation of the staff members and staff burnout. Perhaps the crucial issue for burnout is not the ideology itself but the degree to which any ideology provides a sense of shared values and purpose among workers (Cherniss & Krantz, 1983; Freudenberg, 1975). Most respondents reported that their values were quite similar to their coworkers. However, those reporting the least emotional exhaustion and depersonalization also experienced the greatest feelings of shared goals and ideology.

Studies by Epstein, Russell and Silvern (1983); Reinharz (1983); and Schechter (1982) suggested that feminist emphasis on egalitarian non-hierarchical relationships within a shelter might produce role confusion and ambiguity associated with staff burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1982). Respondents who reported placing greater priority on feminist goals and ideology reported that they experienced more role confusion and ambiguity than those who emphasized professional goals. However, as stated above, ideological orientation itself did not appear to influence burnout.

Summary and Implications of the Study

Overall, respondents in this study reported less burnout than had been reported in studies of a wider range of human service workers. Although factors that would account for such differences are not known, further study of the influence of feminist ideological orientation, which is presumably stronger in shelters than in many other social service organizations, is suggested. Although there were no statistically significant relationships between ideology and burnout in the present study, comparison with other social service organizations could show the relative importance of the aspects of feminist ideology that involve shared goals.

The relationships between working conditions and the three aspects of burnout studied here suggest the need for establishing priorities for changes to reduce staff
burnout. Program changes should be planned with the three types of burnout in mind. Levels of emotional exhaustion, personal accomplishment, and depersonalization were not correlated with each other, and they clearly represented different reactions by respondents. For example, seniority was associated with greater emotional exhaustion regardless of working conditions, whereas it was not associated with depersonalization or sense of personal accomplishment.

Depersonalization was found to be ameliorated by working conditions that involve egalitarian and non-hierarchical goals of feminism such as being supported and being treated "like a person." In contrast, sense of personal accomplishment was encouraged by the availability of opportunities to exercise autonomy and competence. Burnout may be reduced by allowing more staff input into decisions directly related to residents in the shelter, by encouraging or facilitating peer cohesion and other supports, and by encouraging a fair amount of individual autonomy. Participation in certain non-administrative decisions (such as decisions affecting individual residents) was found to be particularly welcome and effective in reducing burnout by more experienced respondents.

The findings of this study suggest that clarifying individual job descriptions may reduce role ambiguity and lead to an increased sense of personal accomplishment. Uncertainty about role ambiguity was greater in shelters with feminist goals and ideology. However, ambiguity in these shelters did not appear to be associated with burnout.

None of the working conditions studied were found to influence emotional exhaustion among senior shelter employees. This does not rule out the influence of other, as yet unknown, influences. Individual workers are advised to monitor their own feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and sense of accomplishment related to burnout. A job change may be the best that can be done if changes in working conditions fail to reduce burnout.

REFERENCES

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