

Practice

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Article Title

Impacts of workplace stress on the retention of social workers: a qualitative study

Abstract

Social work practitioners face a range of issues in the workplace. The pressures can lead to stress and burnout, with increased numbers leaving the workforce leading to challenges in the retention of a skilled and experienced workforce. Stress has increased due to current system pressures and was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper reports on findings from an explorative UK study exploring local recruitment and retention issues in adult social care from the perspective of practitioners currently working in the South of England. A mixed methods approach was taken. A group of ($n=57$) social work practitioners working at two local authorities completed an online questionnaire and ($n=13$) were interviewed in-depth. Interviews utilised a semi-structured schedule to collect expanded reflections on issues affecting recruitment and retention. Comments relating to the nature of stress and burnout in social work, impacts of negative perceptions of the profession and possible effects on staff wellbeing discussed by the participants were themed together. Areas of potential positive change to address some of the current concerns expressed by participants, may in turn have a decisive effect on workforce retention.

Keywords:

stress, burnout, wellbeing, retention, social work practitioners

Context

Social work is recognised as one of the most stressful occupations in the UK, with practitioners reporting high stress levels and sickness absence (HSE, 2023). Chronic negative working conditions can lead to stress which might subsequently impact on sickness absence and levels of attrition (Ravalier, 2019). Workplace demands due to high levels of administrative paperwork has been identified as a significant factor inducing stressful working conditions (Ravalier et al. 2021). Despite technology offering a streamlining of bureaucratic processes, it can often be perceived as increasing the dominance of double recording, audit and procedurally driven practice (Pascoe et al. 2023).

Practice burnout in social work has been described as a combination of chronic work-related stress and the organisational environment (Newell, 2020). It occurs globally and across different contexts, being linked to ambiguity in job role, resource constraints, and overly administrative systems which undermine professional autonomy. Research in Nordic countries revealed that social workers experienced most stress in the public sector due to workload pressures and role conflicts (Blomberg et al. 2015). In China, role conflict and role ambiguity have been linked to role stress and burnout amongst new social workers (Tang and Li, 2021). Whilst a study found that 33.2 % of Spanish social workers experienced high levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (Gomez-Garcia et al. 2020). In the UK, high pressure working environments, the impact of austerity resource constraints and a workplace 'blame culture' resulted in high levels of staff turnover and low job satisfaction in social workers (Ravalier, 2019). This creates a vicious circle in which problems with recruitment and retention contribute to additional pressures on the existing workforce, resulting in higher caseloads, more stressful working environments and increased intention to leave (McFadden et al. 2024). Specific groups of workers may be further negatively impacted by stress due to the intersections of various forms of oppression including gender, ethnicity and disability. Black women social workers' experience of stress has been found to be intensified by discriminatory practices as they juggle multiple identities, overlapping societal expectations, and family expectations (Cooke et al., 2023). Racism, invisibility and hypervisibility compound Black female social workers experiences of practice (Obasi, 2021). Lack of awareness and support at work has also cultivated a climate of fear and exhaustion for social workers with neurodiverse conditions such as autism, ADHD and dyslexia, resulting in increased stress (Koutsounia, 2022).

These studies suggest that dealing with practitioner stress and burnout is a global concern - one which might have been further exacerbated since the COVID 19 pandemic (Swords et al. 2024). The impact of COVID-19 on social workers has been enormous as they supported some of the most vulnerable members of society during the pandemic (Hadar, 2021). Practitioners responded creatively to the constraints imposed by lockdown ensuring service users continued to be heard (McFadden et al, 2023), but this often resulted in extra stress contributing to intentions to exit (MacLochlainn et al. 2023). The pandemic resulted in shifts in practice - including more remote working requiring radical modifications to service delivery, increased reliance on digital technology and a need to negotiate home/work boundaries (Kingstone et al., 2022). Increased remote/hybrid working pattern changes were more challenging for newly qualified practitioners who initially require a supportive working environment including more face-to-face contact and informal peer support (Pulman and Fenge, 2024). COVID-19 also generated a new set of risks and procedures which seemed vague at the outset (Kingstone et al., 2022). A study comparing the mental well-being and quality of working life of social workers in the UK before and during the pandemic noted that social workers continued to face increased stressors and work demands post COVID-19 (McFadden et al. 2022). COVID-19 changed working practices as offices closed and working from home became

the norm and despite increased pressures, social workers mostly continued to work creatively, using online platforms and adaptive risk management approaches to ensure those most at risk of harm were 'seen' or 'heard'. Some practitioners found adapting to COVID-19 restrictions resulted in positive opportunities in their practice due to increased support and reprioritisation of cases (McFadden et al. 2022).

Unlike other public service roles, social work has been described as an invisible trade (Pithouse 1998). The confidential nature of social work means practitioners are silenced, resulting in a space where negative narratives built on media reports of rare failings can develop (Leigh et al. 2020). Following the death of Baby P in the UK in 2007 this situation worsened and it has been argued that politicians, in conjunction with the press, actively mobilised public anger towards social work as they had a shared mutual interest in the co-authorship of 'bad' sector stories (Warner, 2014). In a recent survey, almost two-thirds of social workers have been influenced by fears of adverse media coverage, with almost 28% describing that they or a colleague had been concerned by the thought of the media reporting something going wrong with a case (Koutsounia, 2023). Perhaps unsurprisingly, 70% had 'often' or 'occasionally' contemplated leaving the profession because of negative media portrayals. This suggests that harmful perceptions of the profession can undermine a positive sense of identity for practitioners, which then undermines wellbeing.

The stress that practitioners perceive is likely to be a universal risk factor for anxiety, depression, and mental well-being (Maddock, 2024). A study by Ravalier (2019), explored the impact of '*Social work culture*' on the way organisations and society perceived social work. Participants wanted greater respect and understanding for the job from both external stakeholders - including the public - and from government. They described a blame culture towards practitioner decision-making prevalent from employers, the public and government directed particularly towards child and family social workers underpinned by adverse media representation (Turley et al., 2022). Such negative perceptions can result in violence and intimidation. The British Association of Social Workers 2023 annual survey found 49.56% of participants had been verbally abused whilst working whilst 24.03% had been threatened with physical violence.

After a lengthy period of governmental policy-led austerity, evidence suggests there are many challenges with the retention of social workers within the UK. Although social worker vacancy rates had been decreasing from 2016/17 to 2020/21, vacancy rates have subsequently increased to 9.4% in 2021/22 and to 11.4% in 2022/23 (Skills for Care, 2023). Research concerning stress and burnout in social work depicts a field where personal, cultural and societal factors intersect - creating additional challenges for practitioners grappling with increasing demands from both organisations and service users at a time of resource constraint. This research adds fresh insights of the intertwining elements which might increase stress and result in decisions to leave the profession.

Methods

Ethical Approval

This was a mixed methods study. Ethical approval was sought from the [anonymised] Ethics panel – granted February 2023 (Ref: 47759). Appropriate research governance procedures were followed at each LA and approved internally before data was collected.

This project built on previously identified themes within regional scoping work for practitioners (Pulman and Fenge, 2023a; Pulman and Fenge, 2023b). Personal barriers to building social care research capacity noted included changing career. Organisational barriers included recruitment challenges with vacancies difficult to fill and a large churn of existing skilled staff moving on, with knock on effects including the capacity to allow research to take place within the wider organisation. This churn possibly contributing to difficulties in reviewing career pathways to be more inclusive of research opportunities, as covering front-line tasks was always the primary focus.

The research team initiated exploratory discussions with Principal Social Workers (PSWs) for Adult Social Care (ASC) Services at two LAs to produce an outline for a collaboratively agreed project. It was agreed that exploring workforce challenges around recruitment and retention in ASC was a pressing issue within each LA, regionally and nationally. The team adopted a participatory approach to devise the research question and engaged with key stakeholders from practice to focus on four populations of interest:

- Social care practitioners currently working in ASC at two local LAs. Data being collected by an online questionnaire followed up with qualitative interviews.
- Social care staff with responsibility for performing exit interviews with LA staff currently working in two local LAs. Data being collected by an online questionnaire followed up with qualitative interviews.
- Students currently enrolled in social work undergraduate and postgraduate programmes within the region. Data being collected by an online questionnaire followed up with qualitative interviews.
- Service users with lived experience of receiving services at the two local LAs/advocates drawn from LA contracted services. Data being collected by two separate focus groups.

Our broad research questions concerned:

- What could be learnt from each population of interest concerning recruitment and retention issues in relation to ASC?

Our article focuses on data collected from a proportion of the first population of interest - social work practitioners currently working in ASC.

Data collection ran from February to October 2023. Issues of consent, confidentiality and non-harm were considered as essential (Ritchie et al., 2014). No participants withdrew from the study.

Recruitment

To promote awareness of and cascade the online questionnaire, the researchers utilised PSW for ASC services contacts at each LA. One LA was in more rural in location but also contained some urban areas, whilst the other was predominantly more urban. The urban LA experienced more travel congestion and longer time taken to travel short distances. The rural LA covered a wider area with social workers covering greater distances and had more satellite office locations. Both LAs had social workers employed living close to their major offices, but others needing to travel in from further afield.

Questionnaire Design

The online questionnaire utilised a mixture of 30 quantitative and qualitative questions. Our article concentrates on the qualitative data collected. All participants were asked to complete the questionnaire designed to address areas including day to day information about the job; what they enjoyed and didn't enjoy about the role; organisational suggestions regarding the recruitment process, future joiners and the working environment; what career changes they planned to make in the next three years; whether they were planning to leave social care in the next three years; and what they considered to be most important for the development of social care in the immediate future and the biggest challenges facing it.

Consent for completing the questionnaire was obtained before participants proceeded.

Interviews

Follow-up in-depth interviews of up to one hour in duration utilised qualitative techniques.

From the ($n=97$) social care practitioners who participated - a group consisting of social workers, allied health professionals and unregistered and other social care practitioners - ($n=57$) social workers (quotes denoted as *P1xx OS*) completed the questionnaire and ($n=13$) were interviewed (quotes denoted as *P1xx*). All interviews were audio-recorded. A semi-structured interview schedule was constructed to collect expanded reflections on issues affecting recruitment and retention: observations on reasons for wanting to enter and leave the profession and how they viewed the current situation within social care and its future development.

Transcription was carried out by an authorised transcription agency. The research team then listened through to each recording whilst reading through each transcription and made amendments as appropriate to ensure authenticity.

Verbal consent was obtained before each telephone interview took place.

Data Analysis

A generic qualitative approach to thematic analysis was used (Caelli et al., 2016) with inter-researcher interpretation. Following familiarisation with the transcripts, a member of the team charted themes. Subsequently, to minimise possible bias, a second researcher familiarised themselves with the transcripts and the matrix of initial themes. Both developed an agreed coding scheme using an analytical framework that combined a priori issues from the original topic guide and emerging themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Themes were identified and coded and then agreed between the two researchers.

Limitations of study

This study may have been affected by respondent selection and bias. Participation was on a voluntary basis and respondents were self-selecting, therefore people with views they would like to communicate were more likely to agree to participate. Similarly, more resilient practitioners were less likely to discuss areas identified as stress and negative perception themes than others and this offers learning linked to how some social workers negotiate practice challenges in more positive ways. It should also be acknowledged that some might feel uncomfortable raising this topic within a culture where broaching mental health difficulties can sometimes be viewed as a sign of weakness (Rose and Palattiyil, 2020). The study took place in one region of the UK and thus may not be nationally typical.

Results

Comments relating to the nature of stress and burnout in social work, impacts of negative perceptions of the profession and possible effects on staff wellbeing discussed by the participants were themed together and are described.

Stress and retention in frontline practice

A key theme emerging from the research concerned the stress caused by working in a sector beset by increasing demand and perceived increased risks, which lowered resilience over prolonged periods of time contributing to burnout and potential workplace attrition. Managing risk across a heavy caseload without adequate organisational support was identified as a particular problem:

The demands are increasing and many frontline workers are overwhelmed by their caseloads. This means individuals are carrying risk with a variable amount of support. [P197 OS]

Social work is a relationship-based profession where dealing with the emotions of others is a core aspect of practice. However, a lack of recognition of the emotional labour required in practice is exacerbated by additional pressures caused by growing caseloads, bureaucracy and resource constraints:

...you have all these meetings every day where they're bringing more cases and more cases that need allocation and you feel guilty and sometimes you take it, because you have this guilty feeling about they need help but then you will be overwhelmed with the amount of cases that you have. [P157]

COVID-19 and post pandemic effects contributing to stress were noted, including the impact of home working resulting in less face-to-face contact with colleagues and managers, whilst trying to respond to increasingly complex and risky cases. This reduced an important element of informal peer support, and had been compounded in office environments by a move to hotdesking resulting in limited confidential spaces:

...there's no office to go, if you need to cry or have a private chat. And the job does make you cry from time to time. I think that's just being a social worker. [P100]

The current challenges in adult services appear to be experienced by both managers and frontline practitioners, but there is a perception that these challenges are not being adequately acknowledged by the wider management system:

Staff burnout - massive problem of moral injury and no recognition from management above... [P109 OS]

I do care greatly about my work and the profession but underfunding and lack of insight into the service by senior managers leads to a huge disparity between senior managers and staff on the ground. [P117 OS]

Others highlighted a need to remove some of the bureaucratic elements to free up time for more front-line practice:

If it says, finance query or something like that, that needs to go directly to Finance. I don't think social workers should be wasting their time updating support plans to reflect things... [P100 OS]

Negative perceptions of social work

Many participants documented the increasing negative views of ASC from service users and their families which appear to be a direct result of frustrations caused by resource constraints and high caseloads. This was often depicted as a 'normal' aspect of the job:

...cross and angry family members that take it out on you due to the wait. [P189 OS]

The negative opinions of those that use services might be exacerbated by negative media coverage, which can also undermine practitioner feelings about their own worth:

...someone at a local level could say really good things about social working and to us that means a lot and we hear it. But they won't be the ones deciding the articles in BBC News or, you know, whatever news company it is...It will never have that reach, will it? I mean, no-one wants to...no-one wants to listen to good news... [P161]

Stress caused by working in an underfunded sector facing increased demands creates challenges for practitioners who experience 'moral injury' - occurring when work stress violates an individuals' moral values - alongside challenges to professional values. This is exacerbated by dealing with negative perceptions of wider society about their professional role. This may undermine their desire to remain in the sector long-term, although some participants felt that the situation could be improved by more organisational and public appreciation of the challenges faced:

Address staffing and resources issues and raise awareness to be able to manage the expectation of the general public and other professionals. [P119 OS]

Recognition from within the organisation and public of the value of social workers [P123 OS]

Discussion

Social work can be rewarding but is also stressful. Our research links current practitioner insights of the challenges faced in a rapidly changing world where resource constraints, growing caseloads and bureaucracy place increasing stress on practitioners. However, it is important to note that potential solutions were identified by participants to help transform practice, including reducing bureaucracy and improving supervision practice. These findings are important for increasing the contextual demand to consider and realistically debate and discuss amongst practitioners and organisations approaches to stress, burnout and changes that could improve the retention of a skilled workforce.

To date, social work has lacked an established research culture resulting in limited high-quality research evidence alongside limited staff research opportunities. Practitioners may wish to develop a practitioner-researcher focus to their work, but this is often not supported by their employer (Pulman and Fenge, 2023a). This results in missed opportunities to develop ground-up inclusive research practice driven by the insights and priorities of practitioners and service users, which is essential to underpin high quality care. Investigating practitioner resilience (Collins, 2007), how some practitioners cope more effectively than others - the theoretical balance between empathy and detachment - and ways of reducing stress and burnout within the sector are all credible examples of where practitioner-led research could and should be focused.

The themes identified in our research highlight the stresses currently being experienced within practice, exacerbated by bureaucracy, resource constraints, increasing caseloads, and negative perceptions of the profession. Previous research has noted how negative working conditions can

lead to stress and attrition within the workforce (Ravalier, 2019) and lack of acknowledgment of stress within the organisation can contribute to burnout (Newell, 2020). Our study participants noted how a lack of understanding of the stress they experienced at managerial levels compounded the experience. A 'business as usual' approach denies the extreme pressures the sector faces, placing practitioners in a difficult position between service user expectations and resource constraints (Swords et al., 2024).

Participants also indicated the challenge of managing risk across heavy caseloads without adequate organisational support and this shows the importance of organisations providing good reflective supervision alongside reasonable caseloads. Struggles in providing adequate services is a continual source of frustration in the face of budgetary pressures. Challenging personal and professional ethics of practice causing moral distress - when practice morals/beliefs are blocked by external factors (Weinberg, 2016). This contrasts with compassion fatigue of which our data, perhaps surprisingly, found little mention. This supports other research suggesting that organisational culture is a greater threat to practitioner wellbeing than direct work with service users (Rose and Palattiyil, 2020).

Good quality supervision and manageable caseloads are key in supporting practitioners to deal with the emotional stress that they experience (Quinn et al., 2019). However, lack of supervision and support from management has been noted as undermining practitioner wellbeing for many years (Coffey et al., 2004). Finding ways to increase workplace satisfaction may be a better target for retaining employees than reducing workloads (Brown et al. 2019) and creating effective workplace cultures which provide good quality reflective supervision can be an important mechanism to deal with current workforce challenges. This is supported by a recent policy briefing suggesting that employers need to maximise 'pull factors' which incentivise social workers to remain in practice such as strengthening peer and team support, and providing on-going learning opportunities which support career development (Cook, 2024).

As social work has been described as an invisible trade (Pithouse 1998) in which practitioner narratives are often silenced (Leigh et al. 2020), it is important to engage with practitioner experience to better understand how to respond to the stresses faced. A study exploring social workers' perceptions of work-related stressors and their emotional and behavioural coping responses concluded that organisations would benefit from developing tailored interventions based on an understanding of social workers' perceptions, appraisals, and behavioural responses to work-related stress (Beer et al., 2020).

Kinman and Grant (2022) noted a variation in social workers' preferences for working patterns and arrangements and it is crucial for social work leaders to consult practitioners and strive to accommodate their preferences, wherever possible. Of particular importance to social workers is the need to ensure that their sense of psychological safety - a shared belief amongst individuals as to whether it is safe to engage in interpersonal risk-taking in the workplace (Edmondson, 1999) - is not undermined or their ability to work collaboratively and productively is not impaired. One key challenge for those in leadership roles is how best to support and manage their teams whilst working remotely, and this includes the quality of online supervision. Whilst supervision is a requirement for social workers in England there is limited direct therapeutic support in comparison to other professions involved with traumatic life events (Tuner and Linton, 2023). Innovative approaches to reducing stress and improving employee wellbeing might be helpful going forward - supported by our findings. Looking forward, a specific research focus on the provision of remote leadership in social work and ways to overcome barriers created by remote/hybrid working is required to inform best practice (Wilkins et al., 2020; Pulman and Fenge, 2024).

Our data has highlighted the role that negative perceptions of social work can have on practitioner wellbeing. These have remained firmly embedded within the public and practitioner psyche over many years (Preston-shoot and Braye, 1991). Many participants reflected on the negative views they experienced on the phone, by digital communication and in person from service users and their families. This was often considered as a normalised aspect of the job - with an almost burdened expectation that it would happen regularly. Relentless negative media coverage continues to influence the views and perceptions of the general public and also affects practitioner feelings of their own worth. In common with Ravalier's study (2019), suggestions for improving this situation from our study included improving organisational awareness and public understanding of the challenges faced, with a view of helping to manage expectations. Organisations need to recognise and seek to remedy the challenges faced by frontline practitioners and as a part of this it is important to engage with practitioner concerns. Bridging this managerial gap is imperative and offers benefits to LAs by increasing organisational understanding of the unique challenges and stresses being experienced by practitioners at the sharp end of the profession - also reducing the blame culture inherent within some teams and organisations (Sicora, Lu and Lei, 2021).

It is important to create new positive narratives about what social workers do to combat the negative media representations that predominate public understanding. Previous research discussed the need for social workers to take greater control of their own image, by becoming media-savvy and forming relationships with the media to get their message across (Staniforth et al., 2022). However, this is more difficult than it seems in the newly complicated and fragmented media landscape of 2024, where many derive their news media from different social (digital) sources rather than traditional newsprint, television and radio.

Some researchers have advocated for professional associations and academics to promote positive awareness of social work (Dennison et al., 2007), whilst others have called for governments to support social workers instead of using them for political point scoring and scapegoating (Staniforth and Beddoe, 2017). Educational interventions about social services in schools has the potential to increase children's knowledge about social services and to influence positively the collective stories that shape public perceptions (Weitz, 2024).

It is vital that governments and employers respond to the current challenges that practitioners face, as these intersecting issues create churn and uncertainty across the workforce. This undermines the wellbeing of both practitioners and services users who, as a result of workforce attrition, experience lack of consistency in allocated practitioners and disruption in service provision.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the need for more organisational recognition of the challenges frontline practitioners experience and the opportunity to offer better support through improved supervision and induction processes. More theoretical suggestions for moving forward include mobilising a practitioner led research focus on ways of monitoring for early signs of stress and burnout within current hybrid working environments and the need for innovative leadership through virtual supervision. Practical suggestions could focus more on helping to provide a consistent induction approach, ensuring new practitioners are adequately supported and welcomed into a team environment. Exploring mechanisms to reduce the bureaucratic demands of the role whilst acknowledging the 'pull factors' which reduce attrition is vital, including wellbeing support, the format of virtual and face-to face supervision, best practice in building and maintaining supportive team structures, and opportunities for career development including opportunities to engage in research. Finally, it is important to ensure there is a concerted focus on looking for online signs of stress and unhappiness which new ways of working might hide.

In terms of countering negative perceptions of social work, it is vital to involve practitioners in researching best practice in developing innovative ways of providing more positive media perceptions and strengthening and constructively influencing organisational awareness and understanding of these perceptions. These ideas and implications extending beyond this study to encompass other health sectors - noticeable particularly in countering the increasing recent demonisation of UK GPs (McNamara and Zubairi, 2021).

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The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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